THE SECOND CHANCE WE LOST

IMPORTANCE OF GIVING LOVE ANOTHER CHANCE

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Dedicated to,

those who lost love,
those who loved one-sidedly,
and those whose stories broke
not because of love,
but because of a misunderstanding.

I am Fahad.

Not a hero, not a villain – just a man who loved deeply and waited too long.

It was one of those evenings Goa hides from the crowd, not the loud ones, not the kind with beach shacks blaring music and people stumbling on the sand with drinks in their hands. This place was quiet. Hidden. The kind of spot you only find if life pushes you hard enough, to want silence more than company.

I was sitting on a worn-out rock, a little up the shore, where the waves reached but only gently, like they knew not to disturb me. A cigarette burning slowly between my fingers, the smoke curling lazily into the salty breeze. The sun dipping into the Arabian Sea, throwing melted gold across the water. Beside me sat Mariyam, ten years old, full of questions, full of life.

We didn't talk much at first. The JioSaavn playlist was running quietly on the speaker between us. Some old classics, some 2000s heartbreaks, a few modern songs she liked. Then came that one track — *"Tune mere jaana… kabhi nahi jaana… ishq mera, dard mera…"*

I hadn't heard it in years.

Without meaning to, I started singing along softly. Half-hearted, off-tune maybe, but it pulled something out of me. A memory. A moment. Mariyam turned her head towards me, curious.

"Faaz," she said. That was what she always called me, not Fahad, just Faaz. "Have you ever loved someone?"

I paused.

The question didn't hit like a surprise. It just felt… sudden. Like the sea went quiet for a second.

"You never say anything about your life," she continued, brushing sand off her dress. "I know you like this beach, I know you smoke even when you say you don't, I know you hate coriander, and you only cry when no one's watching."

That made me chuckle a little.

"But I don't know who you were before. And I want to."

I didn't respond. Not right away. I stared out at the water, letting her words settle. She was ten, yes, but sometimes she spoke with the weight of someone who had seen more than her share of the world. And in her voice, there was no judgment. Just curiosity.

I looked at her for a second, trying to decide if I should tell her everything. If she'd understand the way things fall apart without warning. The kind of silence that doesn't heal. The way people leave, sometimes without even leaving.

I was about to speak when my eyes drifted to the far end of the beach, near a lonely food cart where seagulls circled for scraps. Someone was standing there. A woman, dressed in a plain white kurta and faded jeans. Her hair was open, swaying slightly in the wind. Her back was turned to me, talking to the vendor.

But I didn't need to see her face.

It was her. Even after all these years, even from that distance, I could tell. My cigarette hung in my fingers, now forgotten, smoke trailing up unnoticed. The sounds around me faded. The song had long finished, but something kept echoing in my chest.

Mariyam nudged me. "Faaz?"

I didn't move.

I watched the woman laugh gently at something the vendor said. She tucked her hair behind her ear, the same exact way she always used to. No hesitation, just that simple, familiar gesture.

And just like that, the air changed. The beach wasn't the same anymore. It wasn't quiet. It wasn't peaceful. It was heavy with the past, the kind that doesn't knock before returning. The kind you think you've buried deep, only to realize you were just holding your breath.

Mariyam followed my gaze. "Who is she?" she asked, softly this time.

I didn't answer. I didn't even blink.

Because the truth was… I wasn't ready.

Not to see her.

Not to feel this again.

And definitely not to explain what it meant, not to a ten-year-old, not even to myself.

So I sat there, the cigarette burning low between my fingers, the sea whispering things I didn't want to hear, and the sun taking its last breath behind the water. The day was ending. But something had just begun again.

I kept staring.

She hadn't turned yet, but I didn't need her to. That walk, that slight lean when she stood still, the way she held her side bag across her body, it was all her. And now, in her right hand, an ice cream. Vanilla, maybe. She never liked anything too fancy. Said simplicity never went out of style.

My chest tightened.

Suddenly, everything came rushing back like an old film reel, uninvited, unpaused.

The first time I saw her was in the metrology lab back in college. The first eye contact I had with her—the beautiful eyes, those hairs.

“Never in my wildest thoughts did I imagine falling for her, and neither did she expect that one day we’d be this close. The love we shared, the care we gave—nothing ever came close, it was truly unmatched.”

And I?

I thought that kind of love would stay.

Now she was standing a few meters away, holding an ice cream, looking like a faded chapter that had somehow rewritten itself into my present.

My heart thudded loudly, like it didn’t belong to my body anymore.

Do I go to her?

What would I even say? *Hi, it’s me. After all these years. After silence, after distance, after everything.*

Would she even recognize me? Or would it be that awkward pause… that faint smile people give when they don’t remember, or worse, when they pretend not to?

And what if she did remember?

What if she looked at me the way she did when we ended things, cold, distant, tired of trying?

I blinked. My eyes stung. The wind wasn't strong enough to make them water, that was just me, standing there like a fool, letting the past slip through my eyes.

And then… someone walked up to her.

A man. Casual shirt, light stubble, sunglasses resting on his head like he was ready to enjoy the sunset. He smiled. She smiled back, or tried to. But I saw it. That smile didn’t reach her eyes. It was practiced, polite.

Not real.

The kind of smile you give when you're supposed to be okay, not when you truly are.

And somehow, that made it worse.

"Faaz?" Mariyam's voice cut through.

I had forgotten she was there, still beside me, legs swinging slightly as she sat on the edge of the rock. "Why aren't you saying anything?" she asked, a hint of frustration creeping into her tone.

I turned to look at her. She wasn't just curious now. She was concerned.

"You suddenly went quiet… and your eyes—" she paused, "—they're red."

I wiped them quickly, pretending it was nothing. "Just the wind," I said, not very convincingly.

But she didn't push. She looked at the woman, then at me. "Do you know her?" she asked.

I nodded, barely.

"Was she the one you were singing about?"

This time I didn't respond. I couldn't. My throat felt tight, like words would come out broken if I even tried.

She leaned her head slightly onto my shoulder, trying to comfort me in her own way. She didn't ask again. That small silence between us, it was filled with more understanding than most conversations.

Out in the distance, the woman — *she* — turned slightly. Just enough that I saw her full face for a second. Older, sure. A little different. But still her.

And for a moment… I think she looked in my direction.

My breath caught.

Maybe she saw me.

Maybe not.

But everything inside me suddenly felt like it was waiting.

Waiting for a sign. A step. A beginning. Or maybe… just a goodbye I never got.

Two or three minutes passed.

Neither of us spoke. The waves kept rolling in like nothing had happened, like time didn't just slow down for a moment and bring an old life back to the surface.

But something inside me was shifting.

I didn't want to sit there anymore.

The calm I had felt earlier had disappeared. The sunset no longer felt peaceful, it felt loud, like it was echoing every thought I didn't want to have. Her presence, even at that distance, was too much. And the version of me that had once loved her… he was stirring again. Uninvited. Unprepared.

Without saying anything, I stood up.

Mariyam looked up at me, confused. "Faaz?" she asked softly.

I didn't answer. I just nodded toward the path that led back to the bikes. She hesitated, looked once more at the woman still standing down the shore, then got up and quietly followed me.

I could feel her eyes on me the entire walk.

I reached my Interceptor, brushed the sand off the seat, and kicked the stand up. Mariyam climbed on behind me, still quiet, her arms wrapping around my waist loosely, unsure, like she didn't know what I was doing or why.

Truth was… neither did I.

I lit another cigarette, this one quicker than the first. My fingers shook slightly as I cupped the flame, and I could feel the tightness in my chest growing with each drag. I didn't even want the smoke. I just needed something to focus on. Something other than her face.

I looked back once, before starting the engine.

She was still there.

Still standing beside the man. Talking, maybe. Smiling politely. Her posture hadn't changed. But she hadn't looked back again.

And maybe that was the answer I was looking for.

I didn't wait to think anymore.

The engine came to life with a low growl, and without another glance, I turned the bike around and rode away from the beach, from her, from everything that had suddenly come rushing back too fast, too soon.

Mariyam held on tighter now. Not out of fear. But like she knew I wasn't okay and didn't want me to be alone with it.

The road ahead was quiet, empty, lined with coconut trees swaying in the wind. I kept my eyes on the path, but my mind was miles away. In labs. On college benches. On long walks. In late-night calls. In unsent texts.

Sometimes leaving isn't about running away.

It's about knowing you're not ready.

And in that moment, I wasn't.

*****

The road stretched ahead in silence, my Interceptor humming steadily beneath us. The breeze had picked up, brushing against my face as the sun sank lower behind the hills. One hand

on the throttle, the other holding a cigarette, half-burnt, barely touched.

I wasn't really riding.

I was floating somewhere between now and then. Somewhere between this narrow road in Goa and the metrology lab of my college where it all began. Every few seconds her face flashed in my mind, not as she was today, but how she used to be. Eyes that smiled before her lips did. That quiet tone in her voice when she said my name. The way she laughed when I used to mess up Hindi lyrics.

But now, there were questions. So many.

Why today?

Why this beach?

Was it just some strange coincidence? Or was life playing one of its twisted tricks?

And that guy, who was he? Her husband? A friend? Just someone she bumped into?

The more I tried to make sense of it, the messier it became.

Behind me, I could feel Mariyam holding me a little tighter than usual. Not physically, emotionally. Like she was trying to stay close to something she didn’t understand. She hadn’t said a word since we left the beach, but I knew she was watching. Thinking. Putting her little pieces together.

She had never seen me like that before.

No one had.

The guesthouse came into view, a quiet, whitewashed building tucked behind a line of coconut trees, just a few kilometres from where everything had happened. I pulled into the gravel driveway slowly, parked the bike under the porch, and cut the engine. Silence filled the space around us again.

I took a deep breath, flicked away the cigarette, and got off the bike.

Mariyam slid off the seat behind me, but she didn't look at me. Her hands were crossed, eyes low, lips pressed in that little frown she wore when she didn't know how to ask the questions burning inside her.

I crouched a little to meet her gaze.

"Hey," I said gently. "Look at me."

She hesitated, then met my eyes, hers full of confusion.

I smiled faintly, trying to break the weight in the air. "Whatever happened just now... you can't tell your mom."

Her expression didn't change.

"I'm serious," I added. "Or she'll completely lose it. You know how she is."

Still no reaction.

"I'll buy you chocolates. Big ones. And those sketch pens you like. Maybe even that panda backpack you showed me the other day. But please, not a word to your mom."

Mariyam looked away for a moment, then back at me. Her eyes narrowed just a little.

"I won't tell," she said quietly. "But I have one condition."

I raised an eyebrow, surprised but not really. "Go ahead, my princess. What's your condition?"

She swallowed. "I want to know everything."

I tilted my head, playing innocent. "Everything?"

"Everything," she repeated. "Who was that girl? Why did you look like that after seeing her? You didn't answer me before. Your

eyes were... different. You looked like someone else. I've never seen you like that, Faaz."

I looked at her for a long moment.

She was only ten, but in that moment, she didn't feel like a child. She felt like someone who genuinely wanted to understand, not to gossip or to judge.

I gave her a strange little smile, the kind that holds more memory than joy, and stood up.

"Okay," I said, brushing the dust off my jeans. "But if I'm going to tell you, you have to hear the whole story. From school days, to college, to how I met her, to... everything that followed."

She nodded eagerly, already walking toward the steps of the guesthouse.

I called out after her, "I'm not promising it'll be all fun. Some parts will make you laugh, some will probably make you sad. But I promise, it won't be boring."

She turned and grinned. "Deal."

And just like that, the silence broke, not with noise, but with something better: the beginning of a story I had never told anyone.

But tonight, finally it is the time.

We walked into the guesthouse, the sky behind us now completely dipped into night. A few warm yellow lights lit up the porch and hallway. The soft hum of a ceiling fan and distant crickets filled the space.

Just before stepping inside, Mariyam got distracted. A tiny white cat, probably from the neighbourhood, had wandered up the stairs, lazily rubbing itself against the railing. Mariyam's face lit up. "Faaz, look!" she said, already crouching down to pet it. "So cute!"

I nodded, barely managing a smile. “Stay here. I’ll be back in a minute.”

As I stepped into the corridor, I saw her, Sam, standing near the common kitchen, holding her phone with a mix of relief and frustration on her face.

“There you are!” she said sharply. “Why weren’t you answering my calls? I called you like five times!”

I forced a casual tone. “Relax, Sam. Everything’s fine.”

“Where’s our princess? Is she okay?”

“She’s outside. Playing with a cat.”

Sam exhaled, half-smiling now, the worry on her face easing up. “You can’t just disappear like that, Fahad. You know how she is. If something had happened—”

“I know,” I cut in gently. “I just needed a minute.”

Before she could read my face or ask what was wrong, I slipped past her and made my way to the room. My mind was heavy, and I didn’t want to answer any questions, not hers, not anyone’s.

Once inside, I closed the door behind me and headed straight to the washroom.

I stood under the shower, the water hitting my face, letting it run down slowly as if it could wash away what I saw on the beach, or at least the way it made me feel. But it didn’t.

Yeah… I still loved her.

That much I couldn't lie about.

But the truth was, life had gone on, for both of us. She had someone beside her now. Whether she was happy or not, that was her world. And here I was, still standing at the edge of something I

never really left. All these years I had been pretending to move on, forcing myself to. Telling myself, *"It's okay, you'll get there."*

But sometimes, you don't really move on. You just learn to carry it.

The steam filled the small bathroom. I didn't realise I had been in there for more than an hour. Thoughts came in waves. No order. No conclusion. Just moments.

When I finally stepped out, wrapped in a towel, hair still dripping, she was there.

Mariyam.

Sitting on the bed, legs crossed, arms folded, eyes narrowed.

"Faaz!" she half-shouted, half-scolded. "You were in the washroom for more than an hour! I was scared! I thought you fainted or something!"

I looked at her, startled, then burst into laughter. "Relax! I'm alive. Just... thinking."

She didn't laugh.

She stayed serious. "I'm not going to stop asking until you tell me who she was."

I sat on the edge of the bed, still holding the towel tight. "Mariyam," I said, trying to calm her down, "I promise. I'll tell you everything. But for now… please. Let me get dressed."

She frowned. "You always say *later*."

"And this time," I said, looking in her eyes, "later means tomorrow."

She tilted her head. "Promise?"

"Promise."

"Pinky promise?"

I grinned and held out my pinky. She hooked hers into mine like it was a contract signed with the universe.

I stood up and gently pushed her toward the door. "Now go. Let me get ready. Tomorrow's going to be long."

As she stepped out, I called after her, "Oh, and one more thing."

She peeked back.

"Tomorrow, I'll convince your mom to take a flight back to Bangalore. I'll say you're tired, maybe not feeling well. And you and I, we'll drive back. Just us. It'll give us time."

Mariyam's eyes lit up. "Road trip?"

"Just you and me."

She gave a little jump, clapped once, and said, "Perfect!" before running off down the hall.

And for the first time in a long while, I smiled, not because I was okay. But because, maybe, it was time to finally say it all out loud.

Dinner was quiet. I didn't talk much, and Sam kept giving me those looks, the kind where she wanted to ask something but chose not to. After we ate, I brought up the idea.

"Why don't you take a flight tomorrow? It's faster… and Mariyam can travel with me by car. She's been wanting to spend more time with me anyway."

Sam frowned immediately. "Are you serious? I don't like flying alone. And Mariyam? You know she never stays without me for long."

"I know," I said calmly. "But trust me, I'll take care of her. She'll be fine. Just this once."

It took some convincing. A little back-and-forth, some hesitation on her part. But finally, with a tired nod and a sigh, she agreed. “Okay. But don’t let her out of your sight, and keep me updated.”

I promised. And that night, I tried to sleep.

But I couldn’t.

I kept tossing and turning, the fan above humming in slow circles while my mind raced in all directions. Her face, the girl from the beach, kept flashing in front of me. Not how she looked yesterday… but how she used to be. Back when things were simple. Back when she smiled like she meant it, and I believed in forever.

We had dreams. Plans. Promises.

And now?

Now I couldn’t even walk up and say hi.

I must have slept for an hour or two at most. Before the sun was fully up, I laced up my shoes and went for a jog, hoping it would clear my head. I ran the same trail along the coastline, letting the sea breeze hit my face, letting the music in my AirPods drown out the thoughts. Some old Bollywood romantic track was playing. It didn’t help.

I reached the same spot where I had seen her yesterday.

Part of me, maybe the dumb part, hoped she’d be there again. That maybe she felt the same pull. That maybe, just maybe, she wanted to talk too.

She wasn’t there.

And I stood there for a minute, just staring at the waves. I felt ready now. Ready to ask her why she left. Ready to talk, to hear whatever truth she had to give. But it was too late. Or maybe it was never meant to happen.

Just then, my phone rang.

It was Sam. "Where are you? My flight's at 9. Come fast, we're getting late!"

"I'm ten, fifteen minutes away," I replied, already turning around. "On my way."

I reached the guesthouse, quickly got dressed, and pulled the car out of the small garage. Mariyam was still asleep, curled up in bed, so I let her be. No reason to wake her early.

I loaded Sam's luggage into the back seat, and we hit the road.

On the way to the airport, I played some music, something different this time. A G-Eazy track, *"Me, Myself & I"*, came on. It felt… fitting, somehow. Like the background to a chapter, I didn't know how to end.

Sam turned the volume down.

"You're behaving strange since yesterday," she said gently. "Is something going on? You never let me travel alone, and now you're insisting Mariyam stays with you. What's this really about?"

I kept my eyes on the road. "I just want to drive back. That's it. Some time alone with the road, with Mariyam. No hidden reason. Trust me."

She didn't seem convinced, but she didn't press further. I promised her again I'd keep them both updated and drive safely.

About forty-five minutes later, we reached the airport. I parked, helped her with her bags, and walked her to the entrance.

"Take care," she said, looking at me one last time. "And don't mess this up. Mariyam's stubborn, but she's still just a kid."

"I know," I replied. "We'll be fine. I'll see you tonight."

She nodded and walked in.

And I got back in the car, started the engine, and headed back, back to the guesthouse. Back to Mariyam. Back to a road that still had stories to tell.

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I reached the guesthouse in just under thirty minutes, driving a little faster than usual, not out of urgency, but something about the morning felt lighter. On the way, I stopped by a small shop and picked up a few chocolates. Nothing fancy. Just the ones I knew Mariyam liked.

By the time I got back, the sun had climbed up, and the quiet town had already started warming up for the day.

I walked into the room, chocolates hidden behind my back. Mariyam was still curled up under the blanket, only her messy hair sticking out from the top.

I sat beside her and gently said, "Wake up, my cute little princess."

She groaned, turning to the other side. I pulled the blanket down slightly and waved the chocolates in front of her nose. She peeked through one eye, then sat up suddenly. "You got these for me?!"

"Yes," I smiled, "but not now. First, brush your teeth, take a shower. The chocolates will wait. And breakfast's already ready, they're waiting to serve us. So, quick!"

She pouted, but gave in.

"And," I added, "once we eat, pack your bags. We're heading back to Bangalore."

Her eyes widened. "Now?"

"Yep," I said, stretching. "The roads are beautiful today. You're going to love it. Ghat sections, winding curves, U-turn

bends, hills… and the weather, it's perfect for a drive. You'll enjoy every bit of it. I promise."

She smiled, gave me a thumbs up, and ran off to freshen up.

While I waited, I sat on the edge of the bed and scrolled through my phone. Eventually, I ended up in a familiar place, the photos section. I still had pictures of her. The girl from yesterday. I'd deleted most of them long ago… but a few had stayed, quietly tucked away.

I stared at one where she was laughing, looking away from the camera. We had taken it at some café years ago. For a moment, I thought of calling her. Just a message — *"Hey… I saw you yesterday. Can we talk?"*

I hovered over her number for a few seconds.

Then locked the screen.

Not yet.

Instead, I made a few work-related calls. Small business things, just to bring myself back into the present.

Soon enough, Mariyam came out of the washroom, dressed and ready, hair still wet, bouncing with energy. "Let's go!"

We went downstairs and had breakfast, something simple but filling. She was quieter than usual, maybe saving her questions for later.

As we finished, she leaned in and whispered, "When are you starting the story?"

I laughed. "You're serious about this, huh?"

She nodded with big eyes.

"Alright," I said. "It's a long one. You'll need to remember a lot of names, a lot of places. So free up that curious little mind of yours."

She leaned forward on the table, her arms crossed. “Ready.”

“So here’s how it’ll go. I’ll take you back to my school days, where everything started. You’ll see how things unfolded, little by little. And by the end… you’ll understand who that woman was, the one we saw yesterday.”

Mariyam gave me the cutest smile and said softly, “Okay, my Faaz. Go ahead.”

After finishing our breakfast, I handed over the chocolates to Mariyam and gently said, “Okay, go enjoy these. And be ready, we’ll leave in a bit.”

She nodded, already excited, and began unwrapping one. I turned to the helper and asked, “Please pack her bag. We’ll be checking out soon.”

Then I went into the kitchen and prepared a strong cup of masala tea for myself, the kind that helps you slow down, think, and feel a little more settled. Holding the cup in one hand and a cigarette in the other, I stepped out onto the balcony. The breeze was soft. The sun, gentle.

Mariyam followed me, quietly eating her chocolate, still holding onto that one line I had promised her earlier — *the full story, from the beginning.*

She tugged my t-shirt. “Faaz?”

I looked at her.

“I’m ready,” she said, “Start now.”

I took a long breath. The cigarette was burning slowly in my fingers. The tea was still hot in the cup. I looked out at the trees and roads beyond the guesthouse, and with a slow exhale, I began.

“The girl we saw yesterday,” I said, “her name is Noor.”

Mariyam’s eyes lit up. “Ohh! That’s a nice name. It sounds unique.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Unique… just like her.

I’ve met many people, There were other girls, other phases… but no one matched Noor. No one could. No one will.”

Mariyam listened, silently chewing her chocolate.

“But Noor didn’t just appear in my life. Before her, there were other stories… moments that shaped me. So let me start from the very beginning.”

I sipped the tea and continued.

“I was in the 3rd standard. Same age as you now. It was just after the summer holidays. That day, a new student joined our class. A girl. The teacher asked her to come forward near the blackboard. She had short hair, wore a plain uniform, and spoke so softly you could barely hear her.”

I smiled, remembering.

“Her name was Riya.”

Mariyam grinned. “That’s cute too.”

“Yeah, it was. And she was cute. The way she smiled, the way she spoke, she had this calmness about her. I didn’t know what it was at that time, but something made me notice her.”

I flicked some ash off the cigarette and leaned slightly on the railing.

“I started liking her. Not in a grown-up way. Just this innocent liking. I would find excuses to talk to her, ask for notes, offer my notebook, invite her to sit with me during lunch. Small things. I never told anyone. Not even my closest friends.”

“Eventually, we became friends. The following year, we moved to the 4th standard. By that time, I felt comfortable enough to believe that even if I told her how I felt, she wouldn’t misunderstand or complain to the teacher.”

"So one day, I made a small plan with one of my friends. I asked him to tell Riya to wait for me after school. He went to her and said, 'Fahad wants to tell you something, please don't leave before talking to him.' She asked, 'What's it about?' But he just smiled and ran back."

Mariyam was listening without blinking.

"When the last bell rang, I was scared. Proper nervous. Not because I didn't know what to say… but what if she didn't take it well? What if she tells the teacher? What if it reached my parents?"

"But I still went."

"She was waiting at the school gate. She looked at me and said, 'Be quick, Fahad. I have to go home, some homework's pending.' I nodded and said, 'Just wait a second. This is important. And… please don't tell anyone.'"

"She gave me a curious look and said, 'Okay. Go on. I promise.'"

I laughed softly. "I was shivering. My hands were frozen. But somehow, I managed to say it."

"I told her, 'Riya… I think I like you.'"

Mariyam leaned closer, eyes wide.

"She didn't say anything. Just blushed a little… looked at me once… and quietly walked away. No answer. Nothing."

"I turned around, still blushing myself. But that's when I noticed, someone was nearby."

"Her name was Ranjeeta. She was a classmate and stood close enough to hear everything."

I looked at Mariyam. "And I knew… this was not going to stay secret."

Mariyam giggled. "Oh no."

"Yep," I smiled. "Within two weeks, it spread through the class. 'Fahad proposed to Riya,' 'He said this, he said that…' I was scared. What if the teacher found out?"

"And then, one day, it happened."

"The teacher called both of us in front of the class. Said, 'Fahad, Riya, I heard something. What's going on?' I was caught off guard. But I admitted it. I said, 'Yes. I told her something. It was my mistake.'"

"The teacher turned to Riya. She hesitated… but then explained the whole thing."

I paused.

"She looked at me and said, 'You're here to study, not do all this nonsense. You're just a kid. I regret nominating you for student of the year.'"

"And then… she picked up the stick. Hit both my hands. Then Riya's. Even though it wasn't her fault."

"I was sad, not just because I got punished… but because she got punished too. Just because I liked her."

There was a pause.

Mariyam finished her chocolate, looked at me and said, "Interesting! Faaz… at 10–11, most kids are still learning how to talk properly. And you were already doing this in the 4th standard?"

She laughed softly.

I looked at the cigarette in my hand. The ash was at the end now, nearly touching my fingers. I threw it off the edge of the balcony.

"Let's go, Mariyam. We'll continue this in the car."

We walked out. I started the car, and as we both settled in, Mariyam looked at me and said, “Please, Faaz… don’t stop now. I want to know more.”

I smiled and shifted into first gear.

“Alright. Let’s go a little deeper.”

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As I drove, I glanced at Mariyam and asked, “Where was I in the story?”
She replied instantly, “The teacher hit both of you in 4th class!”

“Ah, yes,” I nodded. “After that… I stopped talking to her. Even if I tried, our classmates would tease or make a scene. So, I just… distanced myself.”

“Days turned into months, and months into years. I never asked her for an answer, whether she felt the same, or even understood what I meant back then. I kept it all to myself.”

“But every year,” I continued, “during our Annual Dance Fest, we’d always be paired together. Riya and I, the go-to duo. We were both good at dancing, so teachers made us the lead pair for group performances.”

Mariyam smiled, listening closely.

“I’d talk to her then, but only casually. Choreography, steps, costumes… nothing personal. But inside, the feelings never really faded. I never told anyone. Not then”

Mariyam looked thoughtful. “Hmm... that’s kind of sweet… and kind of sad.”

I smiled faintly. “Yeah. It was both.”

The road stretched ahead, quiet and open, just like the memories I was finally starting to unpack.

I glanced at Mariyam as the car moved along the quiet road. “Want to hear what happened in the 9th standard?”

She nodded eagerly.

“I had grown more confident by then. And somewhere inside, I felt, this time, she’d say yes. So, I planned it all. After school, I asked her to meet me at the park just across from the gate. She agreed.”

“My friends were with me, pretending not to watch, but obviously watching. She finally came. I walked her a little away, near the trees. It was quiet there.”

“I looked at her and said, ‘Riya, I think I’m in love with you. I’ve felt this since 3rd standard… I never had the courage to say it. Do you feel the same?’”

“She looked at me seriously and replied, ‘You say you love me, but I heard you’re with someone else… Arpita.’”

I laughed nervously. ‘What? Arpita? I spoke to her just a couple of times, about some class project. That’s all. There’s never been anyone else. It’s always been you.’”

“She didn’t say anything. Just walked a few steps away. I called out, ‘Please answer before you go.’”

“She turned, smiled… and softly said, ‘Yes.’”

“I swear, Mariyam… it felt like magic.”

Mariyam was listening without blinking, completely drawn in. Her half-eaten chocolate was now forgotten in her hand.

“But Faaz,” she interrupted softly, “you still didn’t tell me about Noor.”

I smiled, eyes still on the road. “I will, Mariyam. I promise I’ll tell you everything about Noor. But first… you need to hear the whole story, every part of it. Only then you’ll understand who she really was… and what she meant to me.”

Mariyam nodded slowly, curious. I added with a grin, “Don’t you want to know how your Faaz was in school days? In college? The embarrassing stuff, the funny stories? The moments that shaped me?”

She giggled, “Of course! I want to know *everything*! No skipping. Not even the weird parts.”

“Okay then,” I said, shifting gears, “Buckle up. Because your Faaz wasn’t always this serious. There were some real comedy scenes too. You’ll be surprised how dramatic and foolish I could be sometimes.”

Mariyam leaned back, ready. “I’m listening.”

I smiled to myself. For the first time in years, I wasn’t just remembering, I was reliving it all. And telling it to someone who genuinely cared.

The road stretched quietly ahead, the breeze slipping in through the half-open window. I glanced at Mariyam and smiled.

“You know, Mariyam… my love story didn’t begin with Noor. It began much before that, with Riya.”

Her eyes shifted to me, curious. I continued, “And you probably don’t know this, but I was a proper athlete in school, state-level in hurdles, 100m sprint, even javelin. Sports Day used to be a big deal for us. My friends and I would practice for hours, almost two every day. We even got permission from the principal.”

Mariyam was already hooked.

“Riya and her friends also joined those practice sessions. That’s when I got to spend time with her, small walks, long talks, under the open sky. No teachers, just our friends around. And they had my back, if a teacher came nearby, they'd signal me. It had its own thrill, Mariyam… that kind of adrenaline rush, it’s hard to explain. It felt like something out of a movie.”

She smiled.

“Our bond grew stronger with time. I used to write her letters in class, just silly things, some lines, sometimes poems, and pass them through my friends. That smile on her face when she opened one... I used to watch her secretly, just waiting for her reply.”

“Everything felt perfect. Her nature, her simplicity, her calmness, it all just fit. She was perfect for me.”

I paused, the smile on my face slowly fading.

“But then… something happened. Something I wish never had.”

Mariyam’s eyes widened. “What happened, Faaz? What was it?”

I glanced at the fuel indicator. “I’ll tell you, don’t worry. But let me fuel up first.”

I pulled into a Shell petrol station and stepped out. “Do you need to use the washroom, Mariyam?”

She shook her head. “Nope, Faaz. But I do want something to munch on. Can I go to the café?”

“Go ahead,” I said with a nod. “I’ll be back in two minutes.”

By the time I returned, she was sitting near the glass window on a small counter, munching on a pack of chips with her legs swinging gently under the seat. I paid the bill, smiled at her, and said, “Alright, snack time’s over. Let’s get back in the car.”

She hopped down, chip packet still in hand, and followed me. The next chapter was waiting, the one I hadn’t told anyone before.

The car was steady, winding through the curves of the ghat road. Mariyam looked out the window, occasionally crunching a chip, while I stayed focused on the narrow lanes ahead.

"You know, Mariyam," I said, keeping both hands on the wheel, "these roads teach you something. Here, you can't take your eyes off for even a second. One wrong glance, and you're gone."

She looked at me, puzzled.

"Same goes for life," I added. ***"Sometimes we need to be aware… who's entering our life, and who's silently slipping out. Because sometimes, just a little distraction can make you lose someone you truly love."***

Mariyam blinked, clearly confused by my philosophy. She just shook her head and mumbled, "I'm ten, Faaz… not forty."

I laughed. "Alright, alright. I'll make it simple."

I paused for a moment, shifting gears as we climbed the steep bend.

"So… this was during my 10th standard. Morning assembly. We were standing in lines, singing the national anthem, and suddenly, from a distance, I saw a new face. Cute. Buff hairstyle. Looked way older, maybe in her 20s. And I thought… wait, why is she wearing a saree?"

Mariyam's eyes widened, amused. "She was a teacher?"

I nodded, laughing at myself. "Yep. Our new maths teacher. Her name was Rose."

Mariyam grinned. "That's such a pretty name."

"It is," I agreed. "And I don't know how it happened, but I was distracted. Properly distracted. Something about her made me feel awkward… and curious."

I continued, "During our midterm exams, she was invigilating the Social Science paper. I was sitting at the last bench. She stood near me, checking all the students. I gave her a nervous look, and she mistook it."

"She thought you were cheating?" – Mariyam asked!

"Exactly," I said, smiling. "She came close, asked if I was copying. I said no. She flipped through my answer sheets, checking for hidden chits. But the only thing she found was my perfectly drawn India map on the last page."

"She looked at it and said, 'Nice!' That was our first proper interaction. I still remember how happy I felt, like I had achieved something big."

Mariyam giggled, "This is too funny, Faaz."

"Wait, it gets better," I said. "A few days later, I saw her again. At the bus stop. She was walking behind me, carrying a heavy bag of papers."

"I turned around, greeted her, and asked if I could help carry the bag. She said yes. We had a 15-minute walk ahead of us, just me and her."

"She smiled and said, 'Your name is Fahad, right?' I nodded. Then she said, 'You draw maps really well. And I've heard you're good at sports too. How do you manage both?'"

"I said, 'Born talented, ma'am.' And she laughed."

"It felt natural. Friendly. Like we weren't teacher and student for those few minutes. Just two people talking."

Mariyam leaned in, eyes shining. "Then what?"

"I asked her if she was on Facebook. She said yes. I told her I'd send a request, if she didn't mind. She replied, 'No problem. After all, we're just teacher and student, right?'"

I smirked, glancing at Mariyam. "But deep down, I knew. Once she accepted the request… I had my chance."

"That evening, I went home and sent her a friend request. Two days passed. Nothing. Then on the third day… *request accepted.*"

Mariyam’s jaw dropped. “No way.”

“And I didn’t wait. I messaged: *Hi, good evening ma’am.*”

I paused dramatically.

Mariyam whispered, “Then???”

I smiled, eyes still on the road.

“And she replied instantly.”

*****

Days passed. And through those regular messages, I slowly became friends with Rose.

We talked often, not just “hello, hi” kind of conversations, but proper ones. She’d share small things from her day: what happened in school, which teacher said what, gossip about staffroom politics, and even insider news like when exams might be announced.

I’d reply with stories from my side, too. Some real, some exaggerated, just to keep the talks going. Something or the other always happened.

And slowly… I started noticing a shift in me.

The love I carried for Riya since the 3rd standard, it was fading. Gently, quietly… like it never existed. I didn’t even realise how far I had drifted until I looked back and couldn’t find the same feeling anymore.

Rose had become that distraction. And I was allowing it.

At school, whenever we crossed paths, we’d exchange a subtle smile. Not loud, not obvious, just enough to say we knew each other more than anyone else around did. It looked innocent from outside… but inside, I knew I was playing with something fragile.

Final exams came. I focused. Scored 88% in 10th. On paper, everything looked perfect. But something inside me felt incomplete. Rose and I… we stayed in touch even after school ended. But the connection started to thin. The messages grew cold. One-liners. Then nothing.

And Riya… she had become a silent name in my life.

A few weeks later, I visited school to collect my marksheet. I ran into Apeksha, a common friend. Close to both me and Riya.

She looked at me with disappointment. “What’s wrong with you, Fahad? You’ve changed. She’s been counting days since you last spoke to her. She’s still hoping you’ll come back. And you? You’re just acting as if nothing happened.”

That hit me hard. Really hard.

I returned home, shut my room door, and dialed Riya’s number. She picked up, and even before I could speak, she said, “I was waiting for your call, Fahad.”

There was pain in her voice. Soft, but very real.

I apologized again and again. I didn’t explain where I’d been or what I’d been doing. I couldn’t. But somehow, I managed to patch things back. She was kind. Too kind. She forgave easily. She trusted fully.

And you know, through all those years, all that love, I had never even touched her. Not her hand. Not even her finger. That’s how pure our relationship was.

Talking to her used to change my mood instantly. She was my peace.

But like I said earlier… everything ends.

One evening, she called. Her voice was calm. Too calm. “Fahad,” she said, “something’s not right between us. I think it’s time we let go.”

I stayed silent. She continued, “My parents… they’ll never accept an inter-caste marriage. I’ve thought about it again and again, and it feels impossible.”

I pleaded. I tried to convince her. Told her we’ll find a way. But her mind was made up. And that day, after more than nine years of love, we broke up.

Mutually. Respectfully. Quietly.

Before ending the call, she promised, “No matter what happens, I’ll always be there for you. Even if I get married, I’ll always be a friend you can count on.”

And she kept her word.

To this day, we talk, maybe twice, sometimes thrice a week. Just as friends. Nothing more.

And that’s how the longest, most innocent chapter of my life came to an end.

There was a long pause in the car. The road ahead was quiet, winding through the hills.

That’s when Mariyam asked softly, “Is Riya still in touch with you?”

I looked ahead and smiled faintly.

“Yes… she is,” I replied. She calls me… just to check how I’m doing. And she always keeps her promise.

*****

As the road twisted through the hills, the ghat section stretching endlessly ahead, I continued my story. The breeze was light, the silence in the car filled only with the soft hum of the engine, and my voice.

"After school, I took up diploma in mechanical engineering," I said, adjusting my seat a bit. "And that's where the next phase of life began."

"Life was different back then. Teenage stuff. Cigarettes after class, endless sports sessions, bunking lectures, trying to balance studies somewhere in between. That age… we all think we're invincible. That nothing can touch us."

I took a pause, then chuckled to myself. "But listen to this, Mariyam. This one incident, it'll tell you what kind of person I used to be. Short-tempered. Stubborn. And full of ego."

It happened during our machine design exam. The rule was simple: no mobile phones inside the exam hall. Everyone had to keep their belongings in their bags outside, and everyone followed it, mostly out of fear. No CCTV, just trust.

That day, one of my close friends lost his phone. It was gone. He was shattered, and at that age, losing a phone felt like the end of the world. He searched, asked around, even cried at one point. But there were no leads.

Ten to fifteen days passed. Then, one random day during a math class, something strange happened. We noticed a guy, one of our own classmates, using the exact same phone model. Not just the phone, but the same cover too. That same red-black silicon case my friend had.

A doubt rose in my mind. I looked at my friend. He nodded.

I turned to the guy and asked, casually but firmly, "Bro, can I see your phone for a second?"

The classroom fell silent. He stiffened, then hesitated. That was enough for me. His panic said more than words ever could. And then, without warning, he stood up and asked for permission to go to the washroom, and bolted.

We exchanged glances. "That's it," I said.

Three of us rushed out behind him, but he'd disappeared. After five or ten minutes, we saw him walking back, pretending nothing happened.

I walked up to him and said, "Look bro, I'm not trying to create a scene. If you've taken that phone, just return it. We won't tell anyone. My friend is mentally disturbed because of this."

He smirked and said, "I don't have anyone's phone. You can check me if you want."

And then… he pushed me.

I don't know what snapped inside me at that moment, but he had just pressed the wrong button.

Without thinking, I kicked him straight in the chest. He flew a couple of meters back. Then, I went after him, fists clenched, anger blinding me. I started punching his face, dragging him out of the corridor. People watched. Teachers. Students. No one interfered.

My friends joined in too, not violently, but enough to support. I dragged him over 100 meters, all the way to the ground near the canteen. There, the real beating started, ten, fifteen minutes straight. Still, he didn't confess.

At the end, I calmed down and said, "Cool. Whatever happened is over. But next time, don't push someone without knowing what they're capable of. And if you really did take it… just return the damn phone."

He looked up, bleeding slightly from his lip, and whispered, "Fahad, I didn't take anything."

But the look in his eyes… that panic, that guilt… I knew the truth.

We let him go.

The next day, the funny twist happened. He came back with 2-3 grown men. Easily 10 years older than us. Looked like they were ready to fight.

They called me aside to a quiet spot near the back gate. My two friends came along. I wasn't nervous. I was ready.

They didn't even let me speak. Just said, "You hit our guy yesterday. We're here to settle it."

I raised my hand calmly. "Let me explain first."

They weren't interested.

I asked, "Where are you from?"

One of them said a nearby colony name.

I smirked. "Do you know Rohit?"

They suddenly looked alert. "Yeah… who doesn't? Why?"

I took out my phone. Called Rohit right there. Told him the whole situation. Put the call on speaker.

Rohit shouted, "You've come to hit Fahad? Go ahead, touch him. Just remember, once it's done, you'll have to deal with me. And you have *no idea* what I can do."

Their faces changed completely. That confidence melted. They looked at each other, mumbled something, and then one of them said, "Bro, sorry. We didn't know you were *his* guy. No hard feelings."

They left without touching a single hair on my head.

My friends? They couldn't stop laughing.

The guys came to beat me up, and walked away apologizing.

That day, I realised two things: one, never underestimate the value of real friends. And two… being feared is easy. But earning respect? That's the real win.

There was a long silence in the car after I finished.

Mariyam, still holding the empty chip packet, looked at me, wide-eyed. “Faaz… you were *that* dangerous?”

I smirked. “Back then? I had fire in me. But I’ve changed now.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “You’re seriously something else.”

And just like that, the ghat road continued, winding like the memories I hadn’t told her yet.

After that stormy chapter of ego, rage, and rebellion, life slowly began to feel normal again.

Everything was flowing perfectly, studies, friends, those typical college memories. We bunked classes shamelessly, made last-minute plans for movies, sat at roadside stalls eating samosas and sipping on chai like kings without kingdoms. Life was careless… and beautiful.

Then came a moment I didn’t expect, a moment I still remember vividly.

*****

It was just another sunny afternoon. We were playing cricket in our college ground. I was padded up and batting, while my friends were shouting, laughing, just being their usual crazy selves.

That’s when I noticed her.

She was standing near the edge of the ground, not alone, but with another girl and a guy. The three of them were talking casually, smiling at times, lost in their conversation. But my eyes? They were locked on her.

She was wearing a standard college uniform, a sky-blue kurta and dark blue salwar. A red college bag hung from her shoulder.

Her hair was tied, but loose enough for the breeze to play with it. She had no makeup, no drama, just that rare kind of simplicity that makes you stop whatever you're doing and just… watch.

I turned to one of my friends and said casually, "Bro… that girl, she's beautiful, no?"

He glanced at her and grinned. "Then go talk to her, Fahad. What's stopping you?"

I shook my head. "No mood now." Truth was, I was stunned. That kind of simplicity hits differently.

And just as I paused the story, Mariyam, who had been silently listening for a while, jumped in.

"Wait, wait! Faaz, you said she was standing with a boy and a girl, right? So… was that her boyfriend?"

I laughed softly. "Not a chance, Mariyam. That boy? Total best friend vibes. Anyone could see it. No spark, no tension, just the casual comfort of being friends."

Mariyam nodded slowly, satisfied. "Okay, okay, go on!"

I continued.

After a while, the three of them left. I stood there for a moment, feeling like I'd missed my shot. She was gone. I didn't even know her name.

But destiny… it's a funny thing. It keeps playing cards even when you think the game's over.

Exactly two days later, there she was again. Same spot, same friends, same red bag. We were playing cricket again. And I? I was on strike.

I saw my chance.

I intentionally hit the ball in their direction, not in a harmful way, just enough to grab her attention. The guy standing with her

picked up the ball and threw it back. She didn't even flinch. No reaction.

She hadn't noticed me.

We kept playing, but my eyes kept stealing glances. I wasn't desperate… just curious. Maybe it was the calmness she carried. Maybe it was the way she tucked her hair behind her ear while talking. Whatever it was, she had my full attention.

After a while, their group started walking away. We quickly wrapped up the game, and me and my friends casually followed them, not in a creepy way, just from a safe distance.

She walked to the nearby bus stop and got into a city bus that headed toward the heart of the town. We didn't get on. We just stood there, smiling like idiots, saying, "Bro, next time she comes, I'm talking to her for sure."

But again, life had other plans.

A whole week passed. No sign of her. Not on the ground, not in college corridors.

And then… something magical happened.

*****

That morning, I was standing at my own colony's bus stop. Buses were delayed, as usual. I was already late for college. I took out my phone and called my friend, just to check if others had left. We usually coordinated that way, all for one, one for all.

While I was still on the call, I looked up… and saw a familiar face approaching from the far end of the road.

It was *her*.

She was walking beside a man, older, probably her father. He dropped her off at the bus stop and left.

I was stunned. This same girl, whom I saw in the college ground, was now here, at my colony's bus stop.

I whispered into the phone, full of excitement, "Bro… she's from my colony, I think! She's at my stop! I'll call you later." I cut the call.

From a distance of about 10–15 meters, I just… watched her.

Her back was turned, her bag resting neatly on one shoulder. She was waiting for a bus, unaware that someone's entire world was shifting just by her being there.

I wanted to see her face again, to confirm it was really her. But fate, as always, made me wait.

A bus arrived, and we both got on.

She stood by the front door. I moved toward the back, keeping a respectful distance.

In that moment, I smiled to myself.

Sometimes, when something is meant to be, the universe brings it to you, not with force, but with patience.

And I knew… this was just the beginning.

After that bus ride, my curiosity turned into quiet determination.

I couldn't shake her off my mind. Something about her presence, her simplicity, that effortless grace, it stayed with me. That same evening, I did what every college guy does when he's interested, I started digging for clues.

Her uniform.
Sky-blue kurta, navy blue salwar.
That wasn't from my diploma department. Ours had a different dress code. So, I asked around and figured it out — ***she was from the Science stream.*** First-year, I guessed. Same campus, different blocks.

I also found out something interesting, the Science classes usually started at 9:00 AM. That meant her routine was fixed. So I decided: tomorrow morning, I'd be waiting at that same bus stop.

And I was.

Standing under that rusted tin shelter, pretending to scroll my phone, but secretly waiting for her arrival.

Right on time, she came. Just like before, with her father, wearing the same uniform, red bag swinging slightly, headphones plugged in. My heart was racing, but my confidence was louder that day. I wasn't nervous like I usually would be.

The bus arrived. We both got in. She went towards the front, and I positioned myself a little behind her. I kept rehearsing in my mind how I'd talk to her. What would be my opening? How should I sound confident, not creepy?

The bus neared our college stop.

I knew this was my only shot.

*****

As we stepped down from the bus, I gently walked beside her and said, "Excuse me. I know you might be in a bit of a hurry… but just a quick question."

She looked at me, slightly startled. Probably wasn't expecting a stranger to stop her like that.

"I noticed your uniform, you're from Science, right? Which year?"

There was a small pause before she replied, "First year."

She had no idea, this stranger asking her about college years was going to become an unforgettable part of her life.

I smiled. "Actually, my friend's also in Science. He's preparing for the upcoming internals. I was wondering if you could share your previous question papers with me… just for reference."

She glanced at her watch, clearly running late. But still, she nodded politely.

"I can send them to you. But I'm in a rush right now. Can you text me on Instagram instead? I'll send them there."

Boom. Jackpot.

She continued, "My ID is **Afza_khan**."

I froze that name in my mind like a mantra.

And then, she smiled slightly, said "Bye," and disappeared into the crowd.

I was floating. I had taken the first step, and it went better than I expected.

Later that day, after college, I told my friends everything. That *boys' happiness* is something else, like celebrating a cricket win, loud and cheerful.

Still, I didn't want to rush. I waited till I was alone at home. Searched her name. Found her profile, small display picture, blue eyes, black sweatshirt selfie, calm smile. I tapped **Follow**.

An hour passed… **she accepted**.

I wasted no time. Sent a message:
"Hey! Do you remember me? We met this morning, about the Science question papers?"

Within seconds:
"Yeah, Fahad. I remember. Wait a minute, I'll send them. Just need to click and upload."

She sent a few pictures, scanned notes, a few pages of diagrams.

I replied:
"Thank you so much!"

And then came the line that made me laugh out loud:
"But be honest… you really wanted these papers? Or it was just a reason to talk?"

Busted.

I chuckled and said, "Nah, I genuinely needed them. That's why I asked."

Of course, I couldn't admit the full truth, that I'd planned this since the day I saw her at the ground. That I'd checked timings, uniforms, bus stops, all just to speak to her.

We kept talking. Slowly, the conversation grew beyond question papers.
"How's college?"
"Are exams tough?"
"Had dinner?"
Little things. Light things.

Then I casually brought it up —
"By the way… you wait at my colony's bus stop, don't you?"

She replied:
"Yeah. 1st Cross. Roshni Building."

My eyes widened.

I sent a shocked emoji.
"No way. You live right beside my building."

She replied:
"What? For real?!"

I went outside to check.

Standing near the gate, I typed:
"See, is that your window? The lights are on."

She didn't believe me at first.
"Okay. Now it's off or on?"

She turned them off.

"Off," I replied.

Then back on.
"Now?"

"Now it's on."

She sent,
"WTF dude, we live that close?! This is crazy!"

I smiled like an idiot. What were the odds?

One week ago, I was watching this girl from a distance while holding a cricket bat. And now, here I was, texting her at night, with her window glowing next door.

We talked till late, nothing serious, just laughs, reactions, and a lot of **"I still can't believe this"** moments.

Before signing off, she wrote:
"Goodnight, Fahad. Today was unexpectedly fun."

And I replied,
"Goodnight, Afza. Honestly… the best part of my day."

I closed the chat, stood for a minute looking at her window one last time, and then went back inside.

Smiling. Quietly. Grateful.

Destiny hadn't just brought her near me…
It placed her ***next door***.

And this… was just the beginning.

*****

I glanced at the speedometer. We had already crossed more than 200 kilometers. The road stretched ahead like an endless ribbon, winding through trees and dusty fields. The breeze had turned a little warmer now, typical of post-noon drives.

I looked to my right and smiled. Mariyam was still there, her tiny frame curled slightly in the passenger seat, head resting on her folded arms, eyes wide open with curiosity.

She hadn't blinked in a while. That's how deeply she was invested.

I laughed gently and said,

"Hey, are you even listening anymore or just imagining everything like a movie?"

Without looking at me, she grinned and replied,

"Of course I'm listening, Faaz! I'm imagining every single thing, the girl, her red bag, her uniform, even that Instagram DP you mentioned!"

I laughed again and shook my head, easing off the accelerator as I spotted a signboard:

"Taj Non-Veg Paradise – 500m Ahead."

My stomach grumbled on cue. I didn't realise how long I'd been talking without pause.

"Alright, young lady," I said, stretching my arms, "we've covered more than 200 kilometres, and I'm officially starving now. I'm human too, okay? Even storytellers need fuel."

Mariyam pouted and crossed her arms.

"But Faaz… we're just getting to the good part! You can't stop now. I want to know what happened next with Afza! Tell na?"

I smiled and reached across to pull her cheeks.

"Acha, I'll continue… but let's grab some biryani first. I can't tell romantic stories on an empty stomach!"

She giggled and nodded.

"Okay okay fine. But you're not off the hook. Continue while we eat!"

I switched off the ignition, unbuckled the seatbelt and stepped out of the car, the gravel crunching beneath my shoes. The aroma of spicy food hit us even before we entered the restaurant, marinated meat, sizzling onions, the unmistakable fragrance of ghee-fried biryani rice.

We walked in, Mariyam ahead of me, bouncing with excitement like she had just been promised a plot twist in her favourite movie. We found a table by the window and placed our order, two plates of chicken biryani and two cold drinks.

As we sat down, she leaned across the table, eyes sharp.

"So... what happened after that night? The window lights, the late-night chat… Did you meet her again? Did she fall for you already?"

I smiled and picked up the glass of water in front of me, took a sip, and said,

"Calm down, Miss Detective. Let me eat two bites first. Then I'll tell you how things changed after that. Because trust me, after that night, everything started changing. Slowly… but beautifully."

Mariyam leaned back, grinning widely.

The plates arrived, steam rising from the fragrant biryani, and just like that, with food on the table and stories in the air, we continued down memory lane.

Some journeys are measured in kilometers.

Others… in stories.

And that day, we were covering both.

*****

That night, after all those unexpected turns, I couldn't sleep early.

I kept staring at the ceiling, thinking about how life sometimes throws the most beautiful surprises when you least expect them. Just a week ago, she was just another girl I noticed while playing cricket, a face in the crowd. And now? She was texting me from the building next to mine.

Afza……

Even her name had a calmness to it. A kind of softness that lingered in the mind.

After that, things between me and Afza were moving smoother than ever. We had become close, not just "exchange-a-few-messages" close, but the kind of close where even a silent wave from a lit window meant more than a thousand words.

Every night, after our usual rounds of texting, I'd casually stand outside my gate. Just to catch that one glimpse. And like clockwork, she'd appear, pulling the curtain aside, opening her window, and waving a shy little "hi." Her smile, that playful flick of her fingers, I'd be smiling like a fool for no reason. Life had started to feel light… simple… good.

We had each other's numbers by now. Calls became more frequent. Simple ones. "Had food?", "How was college?", "I saw you at the bus stop today." Nothing extraordinary… but everything about it felt special.

On weekends, when she'd step outside her building after a shower, towel wrapped around her head, hair still dripping, I'd catch sight of her while pretending to be doing something else. Just

watching her dry her hair in the sunlight was a scene I never got bored of. She had this effortless charm, she didn't even try to impress, and yet, she did.

Months passed.

She stepped into her 2nd year of science, and I stepped into my final year of diploma. Somewhere in the middle of it all, I realized I wanted to spend some real time with her, away from the noise, away from the crowd, just… us.

I told her about this dam, a peaceful little spot, tucked away from the world. Calm water, soothing breeze, not a soul to disturb. It wasn't easy to convince her, but I didn't force. I just said, "You'll love it, Afza. No pressure, just… when you feel ready."

One day, unexpectedly, she agreed.

That morning, I was at the bus stop early. I had my scooty parked a little away, pretending like I was scrolling on my phone. But inside? I was nervous, excited, anxious, all at once.

And then, I saw her.

She was walking towards me, wearing a simple kurta, hair tied, and carrying that same red bag I'd first noticed at the ground. I watched her every step, but acted chill.

She came close, smiled, and casually placed one hand on my shoulder before hopping onto the scooty. That one small gesture? It said a thousand things.

With a light tap, she said, "Chalo." And just like that, we rode away.

No words. Just wind, roads, and the soft hum of the engine.

When we reached the dam, I took her to my favorite spot, the one where the rocks dipped just enough into the water, where we could sit with our feet submerged, and time would slow down.

She sat beside me, quietly soaking it all in. The sun danced on the ripples, and she was talking, about her college, her parents, her friends, her dreams. I listened. I shared too, things I usually didn't talk about with anyone. It wasn't romantic yet, but it was real.

She clicked a few selfies, some with me, some of the view. "For memories," she said. And I just smiled.

That day bonded us in a different way. After that, we started going to college together sometimes. Our timings matched. We'd meet at the same cricket ground, and ride to college like it was our daily routine. I never expected I'd grow so used to having someone like her around.

But, just when everything seemed perfect, came the twist I never saw coming.

Her exams approached. The center was far from her college, out of the city limits. She messaged me one evening, slightly stressed.

"Who will drop me back, Fahad? Dad, can only leave me in the morning…"

Without thinking, I replied, "Don't worry. I'll come. I'll pick you up after your exams. Just focus on studying."

And so it began.

Every afternoon, after her paper, I'd be waiting outside that unfamiliar college gate. She'd come out, sometimes tired, sometimes cheerful. Sometimes she'd drive, and I'd just enjoy the ride, the wind in my face, her perfume in the air, and her endless stories about college and friends.

Then came the final day.

"It's my last exam," she texted. "Can we go eat something afterward?"

I said yes. We made a plan. A cafe nearby.

I picked her up like always. We were halfway down the highway, chatting casually, when she suddenly said something that froze me.

“You know Fahad… you won’t believe what Touheed did this time.”

I paused. “Touheed? Who’s that?”

“My boyfriend,” she replied, almost casually, as if the word wouldn’t land like a rock on my chest.

I didn’t speak.

Just like that, everything blurred. The dam, the late-night waves, the towel on her head, her window smiles… everything started to crumble.

I faked a smile and said, “Oh… okay.” And then added, “I actually remembered some urgent work. Let’s not go to the cafe today. I’ll drop you home.”

She didn’t resist.

I dropped her at her gate, and the ride back home felt heavier than ever.

All that time, all that closeness, and she had a boyfriend? What was I? A timepass? A backup?

She started talking about Touheed more frequently after that. How he fights. How she still gifts him things. How he asks her for money.

I listened, not because I cared anymore, but because I was trying to understand… how could someone so smart, so strong, fall for someone like that?

A guy who lets his girl spend on him? A guy who treats love like a transaction?

I began pulling myself away.

Bit by bit.

Without telling her how I felt. Without showing my disappointment.

That day, I learned something.

Never hurry with your heart.

And never assume that someone sees you the way you see them.

*****

We were down to the last few bites of the biryani. The air was thick with the aroma of spices, and for a moment, silence had settled between me and Mariyam, not out of boredom, but anticipation. She had that look in her eyes, the one that said *"Okay Faaz, now give me the next chapter."*

I smiled knowingly, wiping my hands with a tissue. "I know what you're waiting for, Mariyam," I said, glancing at her sideways. "Let me wrap this up first… because what comes next, is the story of *Noor*."

Her eyes instantly lit up, like a child waiting for her favorite bedtime tale. "*Noor?*" she echoed, like she already knew this was going to be something different.

I nodded gently, and added, "After Afza, I realized what I had wasn't love. It was affection, pure, raw, innocent, but not love. It wouldn't have worked even if we had tried. Her way of loving, her expectations, everything was different. And you know Mariyam… there's a quote I once read, *'Everything is already written. You're just playing the part.'*Sometimes, life doesn't give you what you want… it gives you what you need to grow."

She didn't say a word. She just listened, soaking in every word with childlike interest.

We stood up, walked out of the restaurant. I paid the bill, and we made our way to the small tap beside the building to wash our hands. After that, I told her, “Let’s walk a bit… I need a smoke.”

She followed me like a curious little shadow, still glowing with excitement.

I walked up to a small roadside shop, bought a cigarette, lit it, took the first drag, and leaned back against the wall, eyes scanning the sky.

And then… I exhaled slowly and began.

“So… Noor.”

I was just about to begin the next chapter — *Noor* — when Mariyam suddenly interrupted, her voice cutting through the silence like a soft breeze.

"Sorry to interrupt, Faaz," she said with a sheepish grin, "but I need to use the washroom. I’m *very* excited for the next part, but let me just go now… because once you start the story of Noor, I *promise* I won't be moving till you finish it!"

I laughed lightly and nodded. “Alright, go ahead. It’s right over there,” I said, pointing toward a small restroom behind the restaurant, about a few meters away.

As she walked off, I leaned back against the wall, the cigarette still burning gently between my fingers. I took a long drag and let the smoke escape slowly into the warm afternoon air.

And in those few quiet minutes… everything came rushing back.

Noor.

Just her name was enough to flood my heart and mind with memories, some soft and glowing, others sharp and aching.

How we met.

How she made even the dullest days feel full of light.

How her laughter had a way of sinking into my chest and settling there for hours.

And how… in the end… everything fell apart.

Not because of hate. Not because of betrayal. But because of *misunderstandings*. *Miscommunications*. *Assumptions* that never got cleared. Love isn't always loud. Sometimes, it dies quietly, in the space between two people who just stop explaining themselves.

And then, the image of her, standing on that beach, years later, hit me like a wave. The same Noor. Same eyes. Same face. Just a little older… a little more distant. I could still see her the way she used to be, in my arms, laughing about something silly I'd said.

I stubbed the cigarette out on the roadside and looked up to see Mariyam walking back toward me, tying her hair into a ponytail.

"Chalo, Mariyam," I said, brushing off my hands. "It's already 3 PM. We've still got more than 300 kilometers left."

She grinned, eyes wide with anticipation. "Story time in the car, right?"

I smiled, opened the door for her, and held out my hand. She took it like always, that little energy, full of trust and innocence.

We slipped into the car, the soft hum of the engine coming to life again. The road stretched ahead like a ribbon, and as I shifted into gear, I took a breath…

And began.

"So, about *Noor*…"

*****

The Beginning Of Us

After completing my diploma, I stepped into a new phase of life, engineering. It felt like a big deal, a whole new chapter opening in front of me. The best part? Most of my diploma friends had also taken admission in the same college. So, for us, it wasn't completely unfamiliar territory, same group, same vibe, just a bigger playground.

But the funny part? I didn't attend college in the very first week. Not because I didn't want to, but because I was out of town for some personal reasons. My friends kept calling and teasing me, saying, "Bro, you're missing all the freshers' energy, all the new faces. Don't cry later."

Every evening, I used to call them and ask, "So, how's the college? How are the teachers? And… any girls in our class?"
Because let's be honest, mechanical engineering isn't exactly known for a classroom full of girls.

One of my friends laughed and said, "Bro, there's only one girl in our section. And in A section, maybe two or three more, that's it. But there's something interesting… this one girl in our class, she's always wearing a mask. Always. Even when people remove it for a few minutes, she doesn't. We haven't seen her face properly yet."

That immediately caught my attention. *A girl who never removes her mask?* My curiosity spiked. Who was she? Was she shy? Was she hiding something? Or was she just… different?

For the next couple of days, her image built up in my mind like a mystery novel. *What if she's really beautiful? What if she's the quiet, serious type?* My imagination was running wild.

Finally, on Monday, I decided, That's it, I'm going to college today.

It felt strange walking into a new environment after a week's gap. I didn't know where the lecture halls were, didn't know which subject was being taught, not even where the washroom was. Basically, I was a blank slate.

But deep down, my focus was somewhere else — *the masked girl.*

I scanned the class carefully, pretending to look for a seat but actually searching for her.

And then… disappointment. She wasn't there that day.

I came back home that evening with a smile though, because curiosity is a beautiful thing, it keeps you excited. I didn't know it back then, but this one mystery girl was about to change the rhythm of my days in a way I didn't see coming.

I took a long breath, looked at Mariyam who was sitting there with that curious smile, and said, "And the next day, I finally went to college again."

This time, I wasn't excited or expecting anything. I wasn't scanning the corridors, hoping to spot her. I had decided to just focus on classes, get to know the subjects, and figure out which teacher was strict and which one was chilled out.

Around 3 p.m., we had a *Material Science* class. The room was buzzing with chatter until the lecturer walked in with a few students trailing behind him. I barely glanced up… and then my friend Kaif nudged me and made a sign with his eyebrows, whispering, *"There she is… the one I told you about!"*

And there she was, the masked girl.

Exactly as they had described. Blue kurta, casual vibes, that black mask covering half her face, but somehow… it made her look more mysterious than I expected.

For a moment, I just stared. I couldn't stop imagining what her face looked like behind that mask. Was she really as beautiful as I had pictured her? Or was it just curiosity painting the perfect image in my head?

Mariyam interrupted me at this point with an eager smile, "You already liked her vibe, right?"

I chuckled, "Yeah… I genuinely did. There was something calming about her presence. I can't explain it, Mariyam. It wasn't like *love at first sight*… more like a curiosity I couldn't shake off."

For the next week, nothing major happened. We just attended our classes, shared jokes with friends, and left. But every time she passed by, I noticed, she *never* removed that mask. Not for a second.

Then came the following week. We had our *Metrology Lab* scheduled. Now, here's how the batch system worked: she was in B1, I was in B2. Her batch would attend the lab first, and as soon as they finished, we would enter.

That day, I was waiting with my friends outside the lab, lazily scrolling on my phone, when she came out with the rest of her batchmates.

For the first time, I got to see her properly, from the front.

Black mask, yes. But her eyes… big, bright, expressive. Her skin was this soft shade of white that almost glowed under the sunlight. Her hair was tied up in a neat ponytail, and she was wearing a sky-blue lab apron. She had a pen in one hand and a file in the other, and she looked so focused while listening to the instructor, nodding slightly, as if taking in every word.

And then… she shifted her gaze and looked right at me.

It was only for a second, but my heart skipped a beat.

I froze. My brain immediately started overthinking: *Why is she looking at me? Did I do something weird? Or maybe… she's actually looking at Furqan, the good-looking guy standing next to me?*

That one second turned my thoughts into a storm. I smiled awkwardly, pretending to check my phone, but inside, I was curious as hell.

As soon as her batch left, we walked into the lab. But the image of her eyes looking at me… it stayed.

Mariyam, who had been listening with her chin resting on her palm, suddenly perked up and asked, *"Wait… Faaz, that masked girl… that's Noor, right?"*

I smiled softly, exhaling smoke from the cigarette I'd been holding in my memory for this scene.
"Yes, Mariyam… she was the one. That masked girl was Noor."

Mariyam grinned, shaking her head, "Wow… I can already feel this is going to be interesting."

I laughed, "Interesting? Mariyam… you don't even know how much."

I looked at Mariyam and smiled, *"You know, Mariyam… it's funny how some moments look so small at that time, but later you realise they were actually turning points."*

She nodded, almost hugging her knees to her chest in the car seat, eager to hear more.

The routine had become so mechanical by then. Noor came to college, attended the 3 p.m. class, quietly packed her things, and left without ever looking back. Labs, same story. She was like a ghost moving in a straight line, silent, focused, and mysterious.

One fine day, after almost a month of just seeing her from a distance, I decided, **"Enough is enough, I'm talking to her**

today.”
But I didn’t tell a single friend. No one.

That evening, I went home and searched for her name on Microsoft Teams, our official college platform. Her profile popped up immediately. My heart was racing as I typed, *“Hey, Fahad this side. Actually, I joined a bit late and missed early classes… could you please help me with the notes?”*

I stared at the screen for hours until finally, after 2–3 hours, her reply came: *“Yes sure, you are in which department?”*

That one line said it all, she didn’t even know who I was. She had never even noticed me.

I smiled and texted back, *“You sit on the front bench, never turn around, and leave without even looking back… how would you recognise me?”*

To my surprise, she replied with a laughing emoji and said something unexpected: *“Why are you texting here? You can text on WhatsApp.”*

I froze for a second. **WhatsApp?** That’s a whole different level of personal. I quickly typed, *“I thought it would be weird if I directly text you.”*

She said, *“Wait, I’ll ping you hi on WhatsApp.”*

Just like that, she pulled my number from our boring official group and within a minute… *ping* — *“Hey :)”* from an unknown number.

It was her. Noor.

I clicked on her profile picture, and for the first time ever, I saw her without a mask. A side profile shot, hair tied back with a band, pencil resting on her lips, and her status: *“Being weird is fun!”*

She was *stunning*. Exactly how I had imagined, maybe even better. Perfect eyebrows, deep eyes, and that mischievous smirk.

For the first time, I thought, *"Okay Fahad, this might be something special."*

We kept it simple that day, barely 4–5 texts each. I didn't want to look desperate, so I told myself, *"One step at a time."*

The next day, college felt different. I attended my classes with a bit of excitement in me. During our afternoon lab, I put on the lab coat, already smiling like an idiot, thinking of that WhatsApp dp.

And then… a classmate, who had barely ever spoken to me, walked up and asked, "Bro, with whom were you texting yesterday?"

My heart skipped a beat. *What? How does he know? Did someone see me messaging Noor? Will this become gossip?*

I tried to play it cool and said, **"Yeah, I was talking to Noor. Any problem?"**

He smiled and said, "No bro, chill. She was just asking about you, so I thought I'd let you know."

Before I could process that, one of my friends, overhearing the conversation, jumped in and said loudly, *"You don't know Fahad, bro. If he puts effort into something, he'll make sure he gets it. He's unique like that. Don't mess with him!"*

I just stood there, silent, watching them bluff like I was some kind of mastermind.

Then that same classmate smirked and said, "Oh really? Then I challenge Fahad to make Noor fall for him. Is it a deal?"

I didn't even think twice, "No deal. I'm not into this. I genuinely needed notes, that's why I texted her. Nothing more."

He laughed, "Good, because one of my other friends is already trying on her."

That hit me unexpectedly. *Another guy? Trying on Noor?*

Jealousy crept in silently, and for the first time, I regretted saying no to that challenge. Because deep down, I knew… I was capable of doing it. And maybe… I even wanted to.

Mariyam widened her eyes, leaning forward in the seat, *"Ohhh… drama already starting!"* I smiled, shaking my head, *"Yeah, and trust me Mariyam, this was just the start."*

That same day, the guy who had asked me earlier about texting Noor offered me a lift to my bus stop. I thought it was normal, just a casual gesture, so I hopped onto his bike. But halfway through, I realised he had something else on his mind.

He started interrogating me, how I texted Noor, why I texted her, what exactly we spoke about. His tone wasn't friendly; it felt like he was trying to scare me away from even talking to her. And honestly? That triggered me.

Right there, sitting on the back seat of his bike, I decided something — *"I'll make Noor love me. Not for ego, not for fun… but because they think I can't. They'll know who Fahad really is."*

From that day on, my chats with Noor changed. What started as a simple *"Can you send notes?"* turned into random conversations about college gossips, songs, memes, and slowly, we grew close. Really close.

That morning itself, I had decided — "Today, I'll meet her face to face. No matter what."

By afternoon, my palms were already sweating just thinking about it. When classes were about to end, I sent her a text: "I'm waiting outside, near Civil branch."
She replied instantly: "Okay, coming."

The moment I read that, my heartbeat went crazy.

*****

I was standing near the Civil block and pretending to scroll through my phone, but in reality, I was rehearsing in my mind: *"Say hi… ask how she is… maybe mention the lab notes… no, no, don't sound boring… maybe joke about something… wait, should I smile more or stay cool?"*

And then… I saw her.

She walked towards me, wearing her usual mask, a college bag on one shoulder, holding a notebook in one hand. But for me, it was like slow motion. Her steps were casual, but each step made my nerves spike.

"Oh god… she's coming straight at me… what do I say first?!"

She stopped, just two feet away, and looked directly at me.
For a second, my mind went blank. All those rehearsed lines? Gone. I just stood there, slightly frozen, my heart pounding so loudly I could swear she could hear it.

She tilted her head slightly, as if waiting for me to speak first.
I stuttered, **"H… hi…"**
She replied calmly, **"Hi."**

That one word from her broke my nervousness a bit, but still, my brain was like a blank whiteboard. I laughed nervously, scratching my head, "Umm… so… you always sit at the front, right? Never look back… so obviously you wouldn't have noticed me…"

She nodded, amused, "Yeah, I guess that's true."

Somewhere inside me, a voice screamed, *"Come on, Fahad, say something interesting, don't let this die!"* But nothing fancy came out, just a lame joke: "Also… where are your brothers? First time seeing you alone."

She smiled behind her mask, I couldn't see it, but her eyes gave it away, and said, "They're coming."

And there it was… the ice was broken.

We stood there for a few more moments, exchanging small talk. She didn't look uncomfortable; in fact, it felt like she was giving me a chance, like she wanted me to keep talking. But still, I was nervous, trying to figure out what to say next.

Inside, though, I was screaming in happiness: *"This is it. The first face-to-face moment with Noor. This is going to be one of those memories you'll never forget."*

I looked at Mariyam while telling this and smiled, "You know, Mariyam, even though I barely spoke that day… just standing next to her, hearing her voice up close, seeing her eyes directly, that was enough. That day, I felt like something new had begun."

Mariyam gave a soft laugh and said, "Awww… Faaz, you were literally starstruck, weren't you?"
I grinned, "Yeah… I completely lost myself for a moment."

After that small conversation outside the Civil block, I felt weirdly lightheaded. Not because we spoke something deep, honestly, we barely spoke at all, but because it happened. I had seen her up close, heard her voice, and for the first time, she had seen *me* too, not just some random guy from the back row.

That evening, as I sat at my desk at home, I replayed those few minutes at least twenty times in my head. Her eyes when she tilted her head slightly, her amused "Yeah, I guess that's true," when I joked about her never looking back… it was all stuck in my mind.
I didn't care if it was small talk. For me, it was a beginning.

The next day, I went to college with a different kind of energy. And fate, as always, played its hand again.

Classes went by like normal, and by evening, I was at the bus stop with my friend Kaif. Noor and her group, those seven "brothers"(friends) she always had around her, were there too,

laughing about something. It looked like any regular day… until something unexpected happened.

The bus arrived, and for some reason, it was nearly empty. Everyone rushed inside like usual, but this time, Noor chose a seat near the front window, alone. Her friends took seats behind her. I sat in the very last row with Kaif, but my eyes… they kept drifting toward her.

Kaif caught me looking and smirked, *"What bro… wanna go sit next to her?"*
I laughed it off, *"Should I?"*
He raised his eyebrows, *"You won't… you don't have the guts."*

Something in me clicked. I pulled out my phone and quickly texted Noor:
"Hey, you're sitting alone?"
Within seconds, she replied: *"Yeah. No one's joining."*
I typed back: *"Wait… I'm coming."*
Her reply came instantly: *"Yes, come please."*

That was all the permission I needed.

I stood up and started walking toward her seat. My heart was beating like a drumline in my chest, but outwardly, I kept my cool, sliding into the seat next to her with a casual **"Hi."**

She turned her head slightly and smiled behind her mask, **"Hi."**

For a moment, I just sat there, soaking it in. ***This was the first time I was this close to her.*** No Teams chat, no WhatsApp, just *her* sitting right next to me.

Trying to hide my nervousness, I said, "*So… this is new, right? Usually your brothers don't let anyone sit near you.*"
She giggled softly, *"Don't worry, they're cool about it. I'll manage."*

That little assurance from her, that I was *allowed* into her space, meant more than words could explain.

We talked about random things, favourite songs, movies, and I even asked if she had ever watched "*After*"*movie*. She said no, so I explained that café scene where the hero and heroine exchange that first eye-lock. She smiled and said, *"Oh yeah, I've seen that in instagram reel."*

By then, my stop had arrived. I was about to stand up when she said, ***"Why are you getting down so early? Come for a few more stops."***

I froze for half a second. She actually *wanted* me to stay? I looked at her and smiled, ***"You sure?"***
She nodded, ***"Yeah, come on."***

I sat back down, trying to hide the stupid grin on my face, and the conversation just flowed naturally after that.

When she finally got down at her stop, I said, *"Okay, I'll text you once I reach home."*
She replied with that soft, calm tone of hers, *"Of course, Fahad."*

I looked at Mariyam while telling this part of the story, smiling at the memory.
Mariyam leaned back in the seat, hands on her cheeks, "Oh my god, Faaz! That's so sweet… that 'come for a few more stops' part? That's like… straight out of a romantic movie!"
I laughed, "Yeah… it felt like one too, Mariyam."

*****

Days passed, and me and Noor grew closer than I'd imagined. Our late-night conversations became routine, the kind where you don't realize how hours slip by until you see it's 2 a.m. She'd say the strangest yet sweetest things, like one evening out of nowhere, *"You know, you have canon teeth and an Adam's apple… it looks good on you."*

I was stunned. *Canon teeth? Adam's apple?* I had never even noticed these things about myself. Later, I secretly googled them, trying to understand what she meant. That was Noor, she noticed things I'd never even thought about.

Her WhatsApp DP was still the same, that side look, pencil in her lips, with "Being weird is fun" as her status. And I remember thinking, *Damn, how did I get so lucky to be this close to someone like her?*

*****

The First Date!

One evening, I decided it was time to take a step ahead. I texted her: "Let's go somewhere… just you and me. I know a peaceful place, you'll love it." She hesitated, "I don't think my mom will allow…" I didn't push that day. But a few days later, I asked again. And this time… she said **yes**.

That morning, I was nervous but excited beyond words. I borrowed my dad's scooty and picked up a large pack of Lays, a chocolate packet with small chocolates inside, and a couple of soft drinks.

I texted her: *"I'm at the bus stop waiting."*
Her reply came quickly: *"Coming in 5 minutes."*

And there she was, walking toward me, black mask on, sky-blue bag on her shoulder, her steps light but confident. She smiled slightly and said, **"Hi."**

"Hi," I replied, trying to hide the nervous energy coursing through me. She sat on the bike but kept her bag between us, maintaining that little gap girls do when they're unsure.

For the first five minutes, I was silent, my brain trying to form words, while she too stayed quiet, maybe equally nervous. Then she broke the silence, "So… where exactly are we going?"

I smiled, finally finding my voice, "Do you remember the movie 'After' I told you about? That spot where the heroine and hero sit by the water? I know a place just like that… a secret spot near the dam. No one goes there."

We rode through small roads, chatting about college gossip and how she had to *fool her brothers* to come out with me. She laughed saying, *"They think I left home early today."*

Finally, we reached the dam. She gasped when she saw it, ***"This place… it's beautiful."***
I handed her the chocolates, and for the very first time, she lowered her mask to eat.

That moment froze me. Seeing her face clearly, her smile, her lips, her entire expression… it felt like I had unlocked a part of her world that no one else had. *She trusted me enough to unmask herself.*

*****

That One Moment!

We sat near the water, legs dangling over the edge, talking about everything and nothing at the same time. At one point, while walking along the shore, I gently reached for her hand… and she didn't pull away.

That touch sent a rush through my body, soft, warm, *hers*. For memory, I took a picture of our hands together and another of our shoes: her cute pink Bata slip-ons and my worn-out black Old Skool Vans. Those photos… I still have them.

We talked for hours, just endless conversations and stolen glances. On the way back, something shifted. She seemed more comfortable now, closer than before.

Halfway down the road, ***she leaned forward and hugged me from behind,*** resting her head lightly on my back, her hands wrapped around my waist.

That single hug? It was like electricity running through me. My heart was racing so fast I thought she could feel it. I loosened one hand from the handlebar and placed it gently on her hand, holding it like I never wanted to let go.

The girl I had dreamt of for weeks, the girl I saw only behind a mask… was hugging me, trusting me, choosing to be this close.

When she softly said, ***"Can we stop for an ice cream?"***, I swear, I would've driven to the moon if she asked. We stopped at a café, shared ice cream, laughed like kids, and for those moments, everything in life just… paused.

Finally, I dropped her back at the college stop where we began that day. She hopped off the bike, smiled behind her mask, *"Bye, Fahad."*
I smiled back, my heart still pounding, *"Bye, Noor."*

That night, I was thinking about her. My mind replayed every second, her smile, that handhold, and that hug…

I paused for a moment, looking at Mariyam as I finished the memory. She was resting her chin on her palm, eyes sparkling like a kid listening to her favorite bedtime story.

She smiled softly and said, *"Faaz… that was beautiful. I can literally feel that moment like I was there watching you both. You know what? You sound so alive when you talk about her."*

Her words made me smile, and I looked back at the road ahead. *"Yeah… I was alive, Mariyam. At least in that moment, I really was."*

Mariyam leaned a bit closer, her voice softer now, like she didn't want to break the moment.
"Faaz… can I ask you something?"

I looked at her briefly, nodding.

"I really, really appreciate the way you're explaining every tiny detail. It's like I can feel what you felt. She sounds so cute, so pure. But… why did it end?"
Her tone changed, from admiration to pain, almost like she herself felt the heartbreak coming.
"Why did you guys get separated? My mind is stuck there!"
She leaned back into her seat, letting the words pour out.
"What could've possibly gone wrong? Why? Why? Why, Faaz?"

Her questions echoed louder in my head than in the air around us.
I didn't reply immediately.

Instead, I just… paused.

I lit a cigarette again. The silence between us grew heavy, like it was waiting for an answer I wasn't ready to give yet.

Outside, the sky had turned silver-grey, and soft rain began to kiss the front glass. The road ahead was glistening, empty. The city lights of Bangalore were just 200 kilometers away.

It was 5 PM, the kind of dusky hour that feels stuck between goodbye and hello.

I thought of stopping for tea… but the drizzle made me push forward.

I took a long puff of the cigarette and finally replied, voice low and rough:
"I did a huge mistake, Mariyam… one she couldn't forgive."

She turned to me with eyes wide, more curious than ever, almost hurt.

"Mistakes happen, Faaz. We're humans. No one is perfect in this life."

And then she added something that landed deep in my chest: ***"Sometimes, it's not the mistake that breaks us… it's the unwillingness to forgive what we once prayed to have."***

I felt that. Hard.

She looked at me, expecting more. "So… what was your mistake?"

I smiled a little, not out of joy, but out of the weight of memory.
I flicked the ash out of the window, exhaled the smoke, and said,

"I'll tell you… let me go with the flow."

I took another puff, eyes fixed on the rain ahead. The Bangalore signboard passed on my left, 198 kilometers left. The road curved gently, but the weight of memories straightened my posture.

"Mariyam…" I said softly, voice lost in the hum of the engine, ***"After that first date at the dam, something shifted between us. We became inseparable."***

*****

Moments That Defined Forever

Days passed. And with each day, she and I grew closer. I had never felt something like this before, not just butterflies, but an entire storm inside me, every time I saw her name on my phone screen. We would talk late into the nights, sometimes about life, sometimes about college, sometimes about nothing at all. But even in silence, I felt connected to her.

One evening, I couldn't hold it in anymore.
I texted her. **"I love you."**
Simple. Straight from the heart.

And she… she replied instantly.
"I love you too."

That reply shook something in me. It was like all the broken pieces of my past were stitched together in that moment.
It felt like, finally, I had done something meaningful in my life.

No one knew about us. It was our little world. Hidden, sacred.
And the irony? It all began because of that guy who warned me not to talk to her, threatened me, almost.
But love doesn't work on rules, or fear.
I was madly, deeply, foolishly in love with her.
The kind of love where you don't just think about her every second, you breathe her, every moment.

*****

Our First Kiss

It happened unexpectedly.

As usual, after our classes, I had made a plan, took her permission, booked two movie tickets for our first-ever movie date. There were no Olas, no Ubers in our small town, we took a crowded city bus to the mall. The excitement was real, but I wasn't expecting anything beyond watching the film.

Inside the theatre, under dim lights and cold AC, something happened.

Whenever a romantic scene came on screen, she would quietly hold my hand, gently lean on my shoulder. I felt her heartbeat sync with mine — slow, unsure, real. 2–3 times she looked straight into my eyes, her face hidden behind her black mask, but those **deep black eyes... God, those eyes said everything.**

I was clueless.
My mind said, "Don't mess this up."
My heart? It was already hers.

After one particular scene, she looked at me again. This time, the look was longer… intense… like she was asking me something without words.
I slightly nodded — "You want something?"
She nodded back, her eyes didn't blink.

I leaned forward, nervous, unsure, breath held, and kissed her gently… **on her mask.**
Just a soft press. Our noses touched. It wasn't a kiss… and yet, it was.
The adrenaline? Unmatched.
Kissing someone, in a theatre, in the middle of a crowd, it felt like *we had broken some invisible rule of the universe.*

And after the interval, she gave me a green signal.
She slowly pulled her mask down… just enough.
I leaned again…
And this time, it was real. Our first real kiss.

Our first kiss ever. For both of us.
It wasn't perfect.
But it was **ours.**

We left the theatre smiling ear to ear, fingers locked, hearts dancing. She didn't like PDA, said it made her uncomfortable.
Mariyam raised an eyebrow, "What's PDA?"

"Public display of affection," I explained.

Noor didn't like holding hands in public at first. We were both against the idea of calling each other "baby" — we used to mock couples who did that.

But **time changes people. Love softens edges.**

She began calling me **Faaz**, sometimes **with that teasing tone**, sometimes with love so pure it melted my anger in seconds.
And I started calling her ***Fajr*** — ***my sunrise***.
Faaz and Fajr, like a perfect verse from a poem.

Eventually, she stopped caring about people.
Started holding my hand in public. In college corridors, on the streets, even in front of her friends, her brothers… and yes, even that guy who had once warned me.

The world got to know.
We didn't care.
Because when you find something so rare, so beautiful, you stop hiding it.

We weren't just lovers.
We were committed. We were a promise.

And we were madly in love, the kind that makes you forget who you were before you met them.

Just as I paused, Mariyam was quietly processing everything I had said.

Suddenly, her voice cut through the silence.

"Wait… what? Now I get it!" she exclaimed, leaning forward, eyes narrowing in realization.
"This is why you asked me to call you ***Faaz***, isn't it?"

Her tone changed, from curious to stunned, her eyes widened, as if she had just uncovered a long-lost secret buried under time and memories.

"This… was the matter all along?"

I smiled slightly, slowing the car just a little as the rain pattered gently. I glanced at her and replied softly, "Wait… let me explain it to you."

I took a breath and continued:
"You were three, remember? You guys were talking randomly that day… and suddenly you called me ***Faaz*** — not by my real name. It just came out of nowhere."
I chuckled.
"I even told Sam about it later, said I kinda liked this name. It had a good ring to it. It wasn't just a name… it was a whole identity. A chapter."

I turned my head slightly toward her, my eyes still on the road ahead.

"After that day, you never stopped. Faaz, Faaz, Faaz, again and again."

I winked at her playfully, trying to lighten her stunned expression.

But Mariyam was still stuck, eyes frozen, mouth slightly open, like someone who had just connected all the missing dots in a puzzle.
Her silence wasn't awkward, it was shock mixed with curiosity, awe, and a little bit of disbelief.

She didn't speak. But I knew she was thinking it.

The past wasn't just a story anymore.
It was real. And now… she was living inside it.

Days were flying like dry leaves in the wind, one after another, faster than I could even realize. Internal exams, lab exams, semester pressure, but amidst all this chaos, I had Noor. She wasn't just my love; she became my strength, my tutor, my biggest motivator. I still remember those long hours in the library after classes, both of us sitting in the last row, books spread in front of us, but more than formulas and equations, I was always listening to her voice. The way she explained, the way she leaned slightly forward while pointing at notes, her little hand gestures, they made even the dullest subjects feel alive.

It became our routine. Study, tease each other, then whisper "I love you" a hundred times like we were competing, who loves more, who cares more. Sometimes she used to scribble *I love you* on the last page of my notebook while pretending to explain a problem, and I used to smile like a fool staring at it. Everything felt so perfect, so untouchable.

Slowly, everyone around us realized what she meant to me. No one dared to text or even bother Noor anymore after they saw her walking beside me. It wasn't fear, it was respect. I never showed off, but people just knew: she was mine, and I was hers. And that respect meant a lot.

My love for her wasn't ordinary. It wasn't just about holding hands or talking sweetly, it was deeper. If she had a problem, it became mine instantly. If I was struggling, she was the first one to

stand by me. We were not two people anymore; we were like one soul living in two bodies.

Every evening became special. After classes, I made it a ritual to drop her near her home. Those rides in the old green government bus, I can never forget. The way she would slide beside me on the two-seater, lean her head on my shoulder, and hold my hand. I used to tap her hand gently with my fingers, playing with them, squeezing them softly, like telling her without words: *I'm here, I'm yours, always.* That simple gesture became our love language.

We had our own little world. We used to get down near the railway station stop. That's where her white Activa 6G was parked in the station's parking lot, I still remember the number: 7123. She used to ride it with this unmatched confidence, but what made it special was her stubborn habit. Every single time, she forcefully, yet in the sweetest, most loving manner, made me sit behind her. "Faaz, bas, no arguments. Sit." That's how she was. She didn't care who saw. She wanted to drop me till the bus stop where I could continue my journey home.

I can still feel the breeze of those rides, me sitting behind her, watching her hair slightly flying out from under the helmet, holding onto the sides of the seat instead of her, because even in that, I respected her space. But inside me, every ride with her felt like heaven.

Everything was perfect. Studies, love, daily routines, every single day with her felt like a festival. She wasn't just my girlfriend; she was the reason my life had color, rhythm, and meaning.

I continued telling Mariyam…

By the time we reached our final year, everything started to change. Placements had begun, and with them came stress,

competition, and endless rules. The college had this strict policy, only those who scored above 80% in every semester were eligible to sit for drives. On top of that, we could only attempt a maximum of 2-3 companies. I hated those rules. They didn't seem fair, marks on paper couldn't decide my worth. So, I never applied for any drives.

But Noor… she worked hard. She pushed herself, and finally, she cracked it. She got placed in one of the top MNC automobile companies. I still remember that call she made to me, her voice trembling with excitement, "Faaz, I got selected!" She was happy, but trust me, more than her, I was happier. It felt like my own victory. She deserved it, every bit of it. She deserved the best future, and I was proud of her like nothing else.

Finally, our engineering journey came to an end. And then came the day that still shines in my memory like a diamond — **Farewell Day.**

*****

That was the first time ever I saw Noor wearing a saree. She chose a **deep red saree** — not too heavy, not too simple, just the perfect balance. The way the saree hugged her, the way it fell so gracefully over her shoulder, it felt like she had transformed into someone divine. She left her hair open that day, long black strands flowing with every small movement. And her kajal-lined eyes, they were magnetic. I couldn't take my eyes off her. For a moment, I forgot the crowd, the teachers, the music, everything. It was just her.

And me? I tried my best to look good for her, too. I wore a **maroon blazer**, a crisp black shirt inside, and black formal pants. Honestly, I never bothered much about dressing, but that day I wanted to look like I belonged next to her.

We clicked so many pictures together. It was almost too perfect, the background, the lighting, our smiles. But what made it even more special was her brother, Narayan. He was there with us, helping us like a true friend. He kept suggesting poses, saying things like, *"Stand closer, hold her hand like this, now smile a little wider!"* He wanted our pictures to look the best. And the way he looked at us, I could tell, he was genuinely happy seeing both of us happy.

I still remember one exact moment like it just happened yesterday, after we were done with the pictures, the corridor became quieter. It was just me, Noor, and Narayan. Then Narayan smiled, gave us space, and walked a few steps away, leaving us alone.

We had hardly one or two minutes. She looked at me, I looked straight into her eyes, and in that silence, without a word, I leaned forward and kissed her gently on her forehead. I whispered softly, ***"I love you forever, ever and ever."***

That moment… it was beyond magical. It wasn't about the crowd, or the farewell, or even the future. It was about us. It was pure, honest, and eternal. Even today, if I close my eyes, I can still feel that exact second, her eyes glistening, her soft smile, and the way time itself seemed to pause for us.

That forehead kiss was one of the ***best moments of my life.***

After the farewell, life started to shift gears. I moved to *Bangalore* for my job hunt. The city was fast, crowded, and full of opportunities, but at the same time, it wasn't easy for a fresher like me. I spent days running around with my resume folder in hand, attending walk-ins, waiting in long queues outside glass buildings where hundreds of other freshers stood just like me, all with the same dream. Sometimes it was rejections, sometimes "we'll get back to you," and sometimes not even a chance to sit for the test.

But I knew, deep inside, sooner or later I'd land the best company for myself.

And through all of this, there was ***Noor's belief in me.*** She trusted me more than I trusted myself. She knew me inside out, my strengths, my struggles, everything. Her words kept echoing in my mind: *"Faaz, you'll definitely make it. You deserve something big."*

Her joining was from June. By then, I was still struggling to find something stable, so I joined a course to upgrade my skills. I didn't want to sit idle; I wanted to sharpen myself for the right opportunity.

And then, Bangalore became ours. For the first time, there was no one to restrict us. On weekends, I used to meet her. The city became our playground — ***KFC dates, new restaurants, roaming in malls, catching movies at cinema halls, visiting the zoo, parks, even random long walks.*** Every corner of Bangalore started holding a memory of us. The way she held my hand while crossing roads, the way she'd scold me for eating too much fried chicken at KFC, or how she leaned closer in theatres when it got emotional, all of it was etched in me.

Finally, after months of struggle, came 18th October. The day I'd been waiting for. I got my offer letter. The moment I read "Congratulations" in that email, I closed my eyes and thought of only one person — Noor. I wanted her to be the first to know. But I didn't tell her immediately. I wanted to make it grand.

Her birthday was on ***20th October.*** And I knew this was it, the best gift I could ever give her.

On 19th October night**,** around 11:45 pm, I sat down and typed a long, heartfelt message. Not just a birthday wish, but my heart poured out, everything about how much I loved her, all the good memories we created, the silly fights, the countless "love you more" exchanges, the library hours, the bus rides, everything. I

also made a *collage of our pictures*— the best smiles, the best poses, the memories frozen in frames.

At exactly **12 am**, I hit send. She replied instantly. I could feel her happiness even through the screen. We were on a video call for almost an hour. She looked so beautiful, even with her sleepy eyes, smiling and blushing. She kept reading and re-reading my long text. She said, *"This is the best birthday wish ever."* And just before hanging up, I told her softly, *"Baby, I have a surprise for you tomorrow. Please sleep well. I'll tell you when we meet."*

The next day was Saturday. I had already planned everything. I booked movie tickets at Gopalan Arcade Mall, the one closest to her PG. When we met, she was glowing with that birthday charm. From the moment she saw me, she started asking, *"Baby, what's the surprise? Tell me na, please!"* She was like a kid, constantly pulling my hand for answers.

We were running a little late for the movie, just 5 minutes left, and cinema hall was on the top floor. We rushed up the escalators. She kept poking me, "Faaz, please don't test my patience!" Finally, while walking hurriedly, I held her hand tighter and said, *"Baby, I don't know how you'll react… but this means a lot to me. And I think it'll make you the happiest too**. I got the job."***

She stopped walking for a second. Her eyes widened, and she looked at me in disbelief. Then suddenly, I saw ***tears of joy*** welling up in her eyes. She covered her mouth with her hand, almost like she couldn't believe it. That moment, her reaction, it was priceless. Happiness, love, and pride all mixed together. She whispered, *"I knew it… I told you, Faaz. I knew you'll do it."*

We went inside, watched the movie, and had an amazing time. But that wasn't all. I had prepared something more — handwritten letters for her, with our pictures pasted neatly, each letter expressing a different emotion, a different phase of our

journey. When I gave her that, she looked at me with so much love in her eyes. She held those letters like treasures.

That day, I gave my 100% to make her happy. And she truly was. She kept repeating, *"This is my best birthday ever."*

For me, it felt like the perfect dream, a **perfect relationship.** Love, trust, surprises, happiness, everything I had ever dreamt of, I had with her.

And after her birthday…

*****

When Love Felt Like Home

Life in Bangalore felt like a dream. We started meeting more regularly. For me, no distance was ever too long if it meant seeing Noor, even for a few minutes. I used to travel more than ***30 km every single time*** — all the way from RK Hegde Nagar to RV College Metro.

It wasn't a simple ride either. Sometimes it took me 2–3 buses, sometimes long waits at bus stops, sweating under Bangalore's unpredictable weather. But nothing mattered. Because in my mind, the destination was worth every struggle. I always made sure to leave office early, rushing through my work, just so that I could be there before her.

Her office vehicle used to drop her off around 6:45 pm. I still remember how my heart used to beat faster as that moment came closer. I would stand there waiting, scanning every face, and then suddenly, there she was. ***Noor.*** The moment her eyes met mine, her whole face lit up. That ***priceless reaction,*** like a child who just had her long-awaited wish fulfilled, it erased all my tiredness, all my waiting, all my journeys.

We would then walk inside the tech park, hand in hand, talking about our day. Sometimes we'd stop for tea, coffee, or a quick snack. Sometimes we'd sit under a tree, or by the food court, just enjoying each other's company. And every single time, I'd tell myself the same thing: *"No matter what, I'll marry Noor only. She's the one."*

She wasn't just my girlfriend, she was my world, my reason to become better. And she made me better in every way. For her, I

changed things I thought I'd never change. ***I quit smoking*** — not because she forced me, but because I could never stand doing something she disliked. I stopped casually talking to my female friends — not because she asked me, but because I wanted her to feel secure, to know she was my only priority.

My life was slowly shaping around her. My habits, my routines, my mindset, everything was tuned towards keeping her happy. And deep down, I was proud of it. Because when you truly love someone, their happiness becomes your own.

In her, I saw not just my present but also my future. I was determined. Whatever came our way, I knew I'd fight it, because for me, **Noor was my forever.**

Everything between me and Noor felt so pure, so real, so transparent, that I wanted my family to know about her. I didn't want to keep it hidden anymore.

My family, especially my mom, already sensed something. One fine evening, I finally gathered courage and spoke to her. I explained everything, how I met Noor, how she supported me in my studies, how deeply we were connected. My mom listened quietly, not interrupting, just letting me pour my heart out. When I finished, she smiled softly and said, *"We've never doubted your choice. If she makes you happy, that's enough for us."*

My sister too was equally supportive. She teased me a little, but behind that was genuine happiness. That day, I felt a different kind of relief. It wasn't just my story anymore, it was becoming our family's story.

Soon, I gave my mom's number to Noor. And believe it or not, Noor actually called her. That moment still gives me goosebumps. I couldn't believe it. The very first day itself, Noor started calling my mom "Ammi" instead of aunty. The bond felt instant, natural, like they were meant to connect. My sister too began talking to her often, and Noor blended in like she was already a part of my home.

It gave me so much peace, everything was moving in a clean and proper way. My only prayer now was that Noor's side also accepts us. But deep down, I knew it wouldn't be easy. Noor had already told me, her mom was a bit rebellious, strong-willed. After all, she had raised two daughters all by herself ever since Noor's father passed away when she was in her 6th standard. Naturally, she was protective, maybe even overprotective. Noor also had a younger sister, and her mom's whole world revolved around them.

Still, I hoped. I believed love would melt every wall.

One day, I made Noor visit my house. She came home and met my mom and sister. The way they welcomed her, the happiness in their eyes, it was a moment I'll never forget. My mom blessed her, my sister laughed and bonded with her. For me, it was like watching two worlds slowly joining.

When I was telling this part of the story to Mariyam, her eyes widened with curiosity. She interrupted me immediately —

I wish I could time travel and visit your days… just to see Noor clearly."

I continued…..

Everything seemed so perfect. I had completed my six months in the company, and I was slowly settling into the rhythm of corporate life. Just when I thought things were finally on track, life threw a curveball at me.

The company suddenly began firing employees. They faced unexpected losses and started cost-cutting by removing people, one by one. I could sense it was coming, but I didn't expect the storm to hit me so soon.

One day, my manager called me into his cabin. His face said it all before he even spoke. With a heavy tone, he explained the company's condition and then handed me a one-month notice. *"I'm sorry… you'll have to leave."*

In that moment, my world collapsed. I sat there, numb, not even able to respond. Just 6–7 months into my career and already… this? My dreams, my efforts, my excitement, it all felt crushed.

I walked out silently, heart heavy, head blank. The first thing I did was call Noor. She was shocked, but unlike me, she didn't lose her calm. Instead, she became my strength in that very moment.

"Baby, listen to me. Don't worry. This isn't the end, this is just the beginning. You're not someone who'll be stopped by such small hurdles. I know you, you're destined to do big things. And I'll always be behind you, no matter what. Don't let this break you."

Her words were like a shield protecting me from the storm. But still, inside I was drowning in thoughts, maybe I wasn't meant for jobs at all. Back in my college days itself, I always dreamed of doing a startup, building something of my own, something where no one could fire me. But reality had made me take the safer path of a job. Now it felt like destiny was dragging me back to my true calling.

That evening, Noor didn't just stop at consoling me over the phone. She travelled more than 30 kilometers through the madness of Bangalore traffic just to meet me. When she reached my PG, I couldn't even express how much it meant to me. I took her to the nearest mall, hoping maybe a little walk would ease my mind.

But it wasn't the mall, or the food, or the city lights that healed me. It was her words.

She held my hand, looked straight into my eyes, and said —

"Faaz, I don't want you to think this is a failure. I want you to see this as a chance. A chance to chase the dream you always had. You've told me about your startup ideas so many times, about how you want to create something of your own. Maybe this is god's way of pushing you onto that path. And don't you dare think you're alone. I'm with you, today, tomorrow, always.

I'll push you when you feel weak, I'll remind you when you forget your worth. I believe in you more than you believe in yourself."

Hearing those words, something inside me lit up again. My fear didn't vanish instantly, but a spark of hope ignited. She made me feel like I wasn't standing at the end of the road, I was standing at the beginning of a new one.

For the first time that day, I smiled genuinely. I realized, maybe she was right. Maybe this was my chance to stop being Afraid and start building something real.

From the initial days itself, I used to tell Noor — *"Corporate thing is not my cup of tea. I can't see myself stuck in this routine. I want multiple sources of income. Maybe for safer income I'll continue with a corporate job, but my real earnings, my main source of happiness, will always come from the business I do."*

I had said these words casually many times before, but after being handed my notice period, those words became my truth. This time, I wasn't just saying it, I was ready to live it.

So I began working on the things I should have started long ago. I started drafting ideas, sketching plans for my startup, researching possibilities. For safety, I also began applying for other jobs, because I knew I couldn't afford to sit idle. But my confidence was at its peak. Something inside me had shifted. I knew I wasn't born to settle for something less.

And honestly, believe me or not, Noor was my lucky charm. ❀

There was something about her presence, her aura, that made everything feel possible. She loved me like no one ever had before. Whenever I fell ill, she would be restless, crying silently just because she couldn't bear to see me weak. She cared for me like a child, scolding me to take my medicines on time, checking if I had eaten properly, sending long voice notes just to make me smile.

She was my caretaker, my best friend, my motivator, all wrapped into one.

We started travelling more often, to our native. Most of the time, it was by train. We used to plan our trips in advance, but sometimes it was just sudden decisions, and I loved how she adjusted with me. And whenever something urgent came up, I'd drop her at the train station, making sure she was safe, even if I had to rush back to work immediately.

But among all these little travels, one day stands out in my memory like it just happened yesterday.

*****

It was during my final days in my first company. Noor was travelling alone to her native, the place where we studied, where we grew together. The train was scheduled to depart at 11:55 pm. That day, I was drowning in work, so much piled up that I couldn't even answer her properly. She kept calling me, asking me to come to the station to see her off. But I simply couldn't, not until I cleared the load.

Finally, around 11 pm, I managed to complete my work. I had just 55 minutes left. Without wasting a second, I borrowed my friend's bike and drove straight to the KSR railway station. I don't know if it was my desperation or adrenaline, but I covered the whole distance in just 30 minutes.

As I parked the bike, I received a text from her: *"Train came, just got in. Mine is S5, seat 24. Going to find my place."*

I smiled, breathing heavily, helmet in my hand, walking fast towards her coach. Inside, my heart was racing, I was imagining her face when she'd see me. She had no idea I was coming.

I called her, trying to sound normal, as if I was still in the office. She spoke in a low, disappointed tone, *"It would've been better if you had come to drop me. But anyway, every time expectations don't work."*

Her sad voice stabbed my heart. I kept consoling her, *"Baby, sometimes it won't be possible. Please understand."* Little did she know I was just a few steps away.

And then, I reached her seat. She was settling down, keeping her bag in the luggage rack. I walked quietly, tapped her back, and as she turned —

"FAAZ!"

Her eyes widened, instantly filling with tears. Before I could even say a word, she hugged me tightly, right there in front of everyone. I felt her heart pounding against mine. I calmed her down gently, brushing her back, whispering, *"I'm here, baby. I couldn't let you go alone like this."*

Since I had more than 30 minutes before the train's departure, I took her outside. We sat on the steel benches on the platform, just like we had in our college days. I held her hand, gently tapping her fingers like I always did. She rested her head on my shoulder, and for those few moments, it felt like the world had paused just for us.

We spoke about everything, from the first day we met till that moment. We laughed at our silly fights, and she reminded me how sensitive she was. Every time I raised my tone a little or acted strict, she would cry like a 5-year-old. And the funniest part? She'd send me selfies of her teary eyes, writing, *"See, because of you, I cried today. This is my 22nd photo of crying"*

I used to promise her every time, *"I'll never make you cry again."* But within days, some silly reason would make her tear up again. That was the cutest thing about us. Her innocence, her raw emotions, they made our bond even more special.

Time flew, and the train honked, announcing its departure. Noor looked at me with misty eyes and said softly, *"This will be the first and last time I'm travelling alone. From next time, you have to come with me, no matter what it takes."*

I nodded, kissed her forehead, and whispered, *"I promise. Text me once you reach. And if you can't sleep at night, just call me, I'll always be there."*

She hugged me one last time, tightly, as if she didn't want to let go. Then she boarded the train, and I watched until it slowly rolled away.

Riding back to my PG that night, the cool breeze hitting my face, my heart was warm. All I could think of was how thankful I was to god for gifting me Noor. Without her, my life would've been incomplete. With her, everything felt perfect.

I was truly, deeply happy in my life, and the reason was just one: Noor.

Mariyam settled back in her seat, her eyes glistening softly under the dim yellow streetlights flashing through the windshield. She said in the gentlest voice, *"I'm really, really proud of you, Faaz. From the earliest days, you were a true man… a true gentleman."*

Her words hit me deeper than I expected. For a moment, silence filled the car. The wipers swung back and forth, clearing away the sheets of rain, but inside, my chest felt heavier, not with sadness, but with a strange warmth.

Just then, Mariyam shifted slightly and said, *"Faaz… I need to use the washroom."*

I glanced at her and smiled, *"Don't worry, we're almost near Tumkur. I know a place just 500 meters away."*

Two minutes later, I flicked on the indicator and pulled the car gently off the highway. The rain was coming down in wild waves now, drumming on the roof, making it hard to even hear

my own thoughts. After parking, we dashed across the puddled path, half-running, half-laughing, to a small chai shop glowing under a tin roof. The rain was so heavy it splashed back from the mud, our jeans getting spotted, shoes wet, but honestly, those are the moments you secretly love.

I showed Mariyam the way to the washroom, while I stood near the counter, my hair dripping, ordering, *"Bhaiya, do cutting chai… do samosa."*

The man smiled knowingly, like he'd seen countless late-night travellers stop by in this weather.

And there it was, the scene you'd write poems about. The steam from the hot chai glasses rising in the cold, wet air, mixing with the smell of fried samosas that had just crackled out of the oil. The sound of rain hammering on the tin sheets overhead, making it feel like we were sitting inside a giant drum. Someone nearby lit a cigarette, and that familiar smell, the mix of rain-soaked mud, burning tobacco, and garam masala from the samosa, created a strange, intoxicating fragrance that only monsoons can gift you.

I took the two glasses, the metal warm against my palm, and placed them on the steel bench where Mariyam had just returned. She tucked her wet strands of hair behind her ear, sat down, and eagerly took a bite of the samosa. The crispness echoed under the rain's rhythm. Then she sipped the chai, closed her eyes, and smiled.

"Faaz… these are the best in this weather," she said softly, her voice carrying a kind of childlike delight. Then she looked at me with curiosity, *"Now please… continue the story where you left."*

I leaned back, blowing gently on my steaming glass of chai, the warmth sliding into my hands. I smiled, watching the rain blur the world outside, and said —

"Fine. Let me take you back to that night, the railway station, and what followed after…

I held the hot glass of chai between my palms, letting the steam fog my face, and then I looked at Mariyam with a half-smile.

"You know, Mariyam…" I paused for a second, searching for the right words, "Noor is exactly like my mother."

She raised her eyebrows a little, curious, and slowly sipped her tea without saying anything.

I leaned in, resting my elbow on the steel table. "One day, me and Noor were travelling back to Bangalore from our native. The bus was kind of rushed that evening. I was already waiting for her at the bus stop, and the moment she arrived, we both managed to get in. Luckily, we got a two-seater window side, the best seat for long journeys."

I chuckled as the memory replayed. "As soon as we sat down, I started arranging all our luggage. You know how I am, I don't like things lying around. So I took her bag and tried keeping it up on the luggage rack. Suddenly, out of nowhere, she raised her voice… *'Faaz! It's my laptop bag, don't keep this away from me!'* She said it loud, and I just froze for a second."

I shook my head, laughing. "I gave her a strange look, you know the kind of look when you don't want to scold but want the other person to *get it*? And she immediately understood."

Mariyam tilted her head, still confused. "What's wrong with that though?" she asked innocently.

I smiled and explained, "See, whenever we're travelling in a bus or train, we should never reveal what's inside our bag. Imagine a thief sitting nearby, how will he know whether it's clothes or valuables? But the moment you scream *'laptop bag'*, you're giving him an idea. That day, Noor realized what a dumb move she made."

I took another sip of my chai and laughed softly. "You won't believe it, Mariyam, the exact same incident once happened with

my mom. She too, without thinking, said something similar while travelling. And at that moment, it just hit me… how Noor and my mother had the same habits, the same innocence. That's when I truly started feeling Noor wasn't just my girlfriend… she was like family, like an extension of home."

I looked outside at the pouring rain, my voice softer now, "And that's why, Mariyam… when I say she's like my mother, I mean it."

I looked at the sky through the half-broken shed of that chai shop, it was already close to 7 pm. The rain showed no mercy, hammering down like the clouds had stored anger for years. The roads outside looked blurred, headlights slicing through the foggy curtain of water.

I checked my watch and sighed. "We'll have to wait at least 30–40 minutes, Mariyam. It's safer that way. I don't want to take any risk. You're with me… and it's my duty, my responsibility to drop you home safe."

She just gave me a soft smile, the kind that carried both trust and warmth.

And suddenly, Sam's voice echoed in my head — *"Drive safe, Fahad. Don't hurry."*
"Oh shit," I muttered to myself, "I forgot to inform Sam where we are."

Immediately, I dialed her number. The network crackled a bit with the rain, but finally, she picked up. "Sam, don't worry," I said, my voice steady, "we're near Bangalore. Just 2–3 hours more, hardly. We'll be home safely."

Mariyam, who was sipping her chai, whispered, "Can I talk to her for a minute?"
I handed her the phone, and she spoke gently with her mom for 2–3 minutes. I could see a shade of relief on her face after the call.

When the conversation ended, she handed me back the phone, nodding softly.

I smiled and leaned back on the steel bench. "Where was I?" I asked.

Mariyam raised her eyebrow, "Noor's story."

I chuckled, "Ah, yes. Noor…"

I stirred the chai with a small swirl and continued, "You know Mariyam, I always used to tease her… *'Baby, wear jeans once naa, I'm sure you'll look beautiful in jeans and t-shirt.'* And every time she would scold me, saying, *'No way, Faaz! I've never worn it in public, don't even think.'*"

I paused, smiling at the memory. "But one fine day, she decided to surprise me. And that day… I swear, Mariyam, my heart just stopped for a second. She came wearing blue baggy jeans, a purple round-neck t-shirt, Ray-Ban glasses, and her hair tied up in a ponytail. She was looking like… like someone straight out of a movie scene. Effortless. Natural. Yet so stunning that even the air around her felt brighter."

I leaned closer, my voice softer. "She was always beautiful in her own modest way, but that day… she looked like a different version of herself. A version that only I was lucky enough to see first."

Mariyam smiled, adjusting her hairs, clearly picturing it.

"That day," I continued, "we went to a mall. Watched a movie, laughed like kids, and then hogged in the food court. Burgers, fries, pizzas, momos, name it, we had it. And of course, dessert of her choice, always something sweet to end the day, because Noor had this thing… she couldn't leave without ending on a sweet note. That day, it felt like time was cheating us, running faster than usual. It was one of the best, most well-spent days of my life."

I sipped my chai again, the steam fogging my glasses for a moment.

“And it wasn’t just malls. Every now and then, we used to plan something. Sometimes movie dates, sometimes long walks in Cubbon Park, sometimes visiting the zoo like kids, sometimes random night-outs. I always wanted to take her to Nandi Hills, to show her the sunrise from the top. But every single time… her deep-sleep habit flopped the plan.” I chuckled, shaking my head. “I would wake up, get ready, even start my bike, but she would just not wake up. And you know what? Even that stubbornness… was cute.”

“Faazy….what I’ll tell you….let’s go next time, no? Every single time she used to mumble this, it was the same line.

I stopped there, staring out at the heavy rain, feeling my chest tighten with both happiness and nostalgia.

Days were flying… and finally, my last day at the company arrived. I stepped out of that office with only 6 months of experience, yet with memories that felt heavier than years. My heart was still adjusting, half sad, half restless about what next.

That night, I went back to my PG. Life had to move on, right? Coincidentally, a new roommate was added to my room that very day. I thought maybe things would get a little livelier. But within just a few hours… I realized I wasn’t entirely right.

He was on call, and not just any call. He was *yelling*. Continuously, for more than 30 minutes straight. His voice bounced off the walls like a hammer, shattering every bit of silence.

I tried ignoring it. But the words were too loud, too sharp. It was hard not to hear.

Moments later, my phone lit up. It was Noor. *Fajr call.* My lips curved into a smile instantly. I picked it up, but within seconds, I realized, no way I could talk with her in this chaos. So I stepped

outside into the corridor, the cool night air brushing my face, hoping for some quietness.

“Baby, what is that noise in the background?” Noor asked curiously. She always caught the smallest details.

I laughed a little. “Arrey, nothing. My new roommate. He’s… creating a full Bollywood drama in the room.”

“Bollywood drama?” she giggled. “Tell me!”

Now, this was our thing. We weren’t just lovers. We were like two best friends, gossiping about every little thing. For us, gossip wasn’t cheap talk, it was a way of sharing the world, laughing at it, and finding our little corner of happiness in between.

So I explained the whole scene to her. “See, he has a girlfriend. Poor girl went to watch a movie with her female friends. But instead of being normal, this guy is literally *screaming* on the phone, asking her why she didn’t ask his permission first. She’s inside the theatre, phone on silent, and he’s shouting, pick the FaceTime, pick the FaceTime. The girl is saying, ‘I’m with my female friends,’ but this fellow just doesn’t believe her. He’s cursing, threatening, even saying, ‘Leave the theatre right now or I’ll come there myself.’”

On the other end of the call, Noor burst out laughing. “Oh god, what is this madness! Thank God, baby… you’re not like that. You won’t do all these shitty things to me.”

Her laughter was contagious. I smiled widely, leaning against the corridor wall, staring at the flickering tube light above.

“Of course not,” I replied softly. “For a smoother relationship, trust is the main key. If there’s no trust, there’s no love. Whatever you do, wherever you go… I should trust you. And you should trust me. Otherwise, there’s no point in being together.”

For a moment, silence hung between us. Not the awkward kind, but the kind that says more than words ever could.

I heard her whisper, her voice softer than ever. “That’s why I love you, Faaz.”

And I knew, at that exact moment, we weren’t just two people in love. We were building something stronger, a bond stitched with trust, laughter, and friendship.

Mariyam looked at me with her brows slightly knitted, her eyes reflecting the curiosity she had been holding for long.

“Faaz,” she said softly, “as you told me each and everything till now… I’m not finding any mistakes. You guys were perfect for each other. Then what made you both separate?”

She paused, as if the thought itself was uncomfortable. “I think… maybe Noor’s mom didn’t accept this relationship? Or… something like that?”

Her guesses came with innocence, but also with an eagerness that made me smile.

I leaned back on the chai shop’s bench, the rain still dancing heavily on the tin roof above us, droplets splashing near our feet. I replied with a slight laugh, tugging at my lips.

*****

“Some day,” I began, “Noor went to the engagement of her very close friend. It was crowded, too crowded. They didn’t even get to eat there properly. So later, she, her mom, and her sister went to a restaurant to have lunch. Just the three of them.”

I could picture it in my head, as if I had been sitting at the next table that day.

“In between all that, suddenly… Noor told her mom about me. About what I was doing, about my family background, about my intentions toward her. Everything. Direct, honest. She didn’t hide a single detail.”

Mariyam tilted her head, listening intently.

I smiled faintly and continued, "Her mom exhaled deeply and said… *okay, but it's not the proper age for marriage. You're still just 21. After 25, we will decide. Ask Fahad to send his parents at the right time for the marriage proposal. Till then, you focus on your career.*"

Mariyam blinked, relief flashing across her face. "So… her mom didn't reject you?"

I shook my head gently. "No. In fact, she gave her approval. But with a condition. A special request from her side, whoever marries Noor must have a solid employment history, preferably working abroad in countries like the US or Europe."

Mariyam sipped her tea again, the steam rising between us as the rain made the world outside blur.

I chuckled softly, remembering that moment. "I told Noor… it's not in my hand today, but I'll do whatever it takes. I'll give my 100% to fulfil your mother's wish. Finally, we both felt relieved, even her mother's end was clear. It wasn't a 'no'… it was just a matter of time."

Mariyam tilted her head again, more confused than before.

"Then what?" she asked earnestly, "If you even had her mother's blessing… then what was the reason for your separation?"

I giggled faintly, though my chest carried a weight. "Mariyam… Nazar is real. I never thought our happy days would vanish one day. But they did. Sometimes life doesn't break you with a storm… it just slowly fades the sunshine."

Mariyam's lips parted slightly, her eyes fixed on me, waiting for what was coming next.

The rain outside grew louder, almost as if the universe was drumming along with the heaviness in my heart. I leaned back

against the bench, my eyes drifting towards the rain outside as if every drop carried a memory of Noor.

“I remembered everything, Mariyam… every small thing that happened between us,” I said, my voice soft but steady. “The happy moments, the fights over calls, her little stubbornness, her possessiveness towards me. She used to check my phone, my chats with friends… and you know what? I never found it annoying. I actually found it cute. That was just her way of making sure I was all hers.”

Mariyam chuckled lightly, shaking her head. “Checking your phone? That would drive anyone crazy.”

I smiled faintly. “Yeah, but to me, it was different. It wasn’t about control… it was her way of loving. And as her boyfriend, I never touched her phone. Not once. Never checked her chats. Never doubted her.”

My words slowed down, my eyes heavy with nostalgia. “She totally changed me, Mariyam. The guy I was before… and the guy I became with her… were two completely different people. With Noor, I became focused, determined. I wanted to do everything that made her happy. I cut off anyone who could possibly come between us. Not because she forced me to… but because I didn’t want anything, anyone, to ruin what we had.”

I paused, and a smile curled on my lips, though my heart ached with it.

“I did things I never thought I would ever do in my entire life. Writing handwritten letters for her, buying her jhumkas, bangles, even a delicate chain for her feet. Every little thing, Mariyam. And in return… she gave me the dream of a future. A future that felt real.”

Mariyam’s eyes widened softly, like she was being pulled into the world I was painting.

"We used to plan everything… after our marriage, what kind of life we'd have, how many kids we should plan for, even their names. She always wanted a daughter. My choice was the same. We already decided, if a baby girl came, we'd name her *Noori.*"

For a moment, the name lingered in the air, almost sacred.

"And about our marriage day… nothing fancy, no show-off. Just a small, simple *Nikah.* Only close family and friends. We both wanted it that way. Pure. Intimate. Ours."

As I finished, silence sat between us for a moment, only the sound of the rain filling in the gaps. Mariyam's eyes glistened faintly in the dim light of the chai shop. She wasn't smiling anymore. She was… lost, like she herself had lived that dream for a moment.

After a small gap, the rain began to ease, softening into a drizzle. I looked outside and exhaled.

"Let's go, Mariyam. The rain stopped. We need to cover another 100 kilometers before reaching Bangalore."

She didn't move immediately. Instead, she leaned a little closer, her voice low but heavy with emotion.

"Faaz…" she whispered, "you two had a world that people only dream of. If everything was so perfect… then what on earth broke it? Please, tell me. I need to know."

Her eyes searched mine, desperate to connect the dots.

I stood up slowly, forcing a half-smile. "I'll tell you, Mariyam… I'll tell you what exactly happened that broke both of us. But not here."

We both walked out into the damp night, the air still smelling of wet soil and chai. We got into the car, the doors shutting away the world outside.

Mariyam sat quietly, waiting, her eyes locked on me, as if bracing herself for the storm that was about to come.

As I started the engine, the silence inside the car was heavier than the rain outside. My fingers tightened around the steering wheel. Within two minutes, my eyes blurred. Memories hit me like sharp fragments, the things that tore us apart.

The misunderstandings.
The ego.
The self-respect that clashed instead of blending.
Listening to others.
Her disrespectful behavior.
The bad words.
Her friends, her mother's involvement… my family's involvement.

Each one replayed in my head like a chain reaction, and my heartbeat grew faster, almost painful.

Mariyam glanced at me. She noticed my wet eyes, the way I struggled to shift gears. Quietly, without saying much, she placed her hand over mine on the gear lever.

"I know it's difficult, Faaz," she said softly, her voice carrying a warmth that cut through my storm. "Sometimes life doesn't give you exactly what you want. But… I feel someday she will realize the love you had for her. She will definitely come back."

Her words gave me a strange comfort, but the ache was still there. I quickly wiped my tears, rolled the window down slightly, and lit a cigarette, the first drag pulling the chaos out of my chest, if only for a second.

*****

The First Cracks

"It was August," I began. "Everything was perfect… until it wasn't."

I told Mariyam how I had just joined a new company, with good pay, good position , and how I thought finally, life would turn for the better. But the timing was cruel. My schedule was packed, my cab routine hectic. By the time I left home at 7 and returned at 7, the day was already gone.

Noor kept asking me to meet, but I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to, but because exhaustion was eating me alive.

Then came 27th August.

Like every day, Noor's texts came one after another. *"Just left PG." "Got into the office bus." "Reached office." "Having lunch."*

She always updated me about every little thing. I had told her many times she didn't need to, that it looked like I was keeping tabs on her. But she would always laugh and reply, *"It's my choice. I want my man to know everything about me."*

That was her love.

But that day… something felt different.

She texted me in the morning saying she was going for dinner with her office colleagues. I replied casually, *"Okay enjoy. Once you reach PG, text me. And call me whenever you get free."*

But she didn't text again.

For hours, my phone stayed empty.

I kept checking it over and over, anxiety crawling under my skin. By 8 PM, nothing. By 9 PM, still nothing. Panic crept in, Noor never did this. My mind started racing towards the worst… *Is she in danger? Did something happen?*

I called her. Once. Twice. Ten times. No answer.

By 10 PM, finally, a text came. *"Faaz, I'm on the way to PG. My senior sir is dropping me. I'll call you once I reach."*

Relief washed over me like a wave. *Thank God.* I told her I was worried, and she replied with a laughing emoji.

But 11 PM passed. Still no call. At 11:30, my phone finally rang.

It was Noor.
"Sorry baby, I was talking to my roommates. Totally forgot to call."

That line, that casual tone, triggered everything inside me. The whole day I had been restless, worried sick, and she brushed it off as if it was nothing.

What started as teasing from my side — *"No one is there to watch you, so you're behaving like this, right?"* — quickly turned into fire.

Her voice sharpened. "If you want to fight, then let's fight right now!"

And I… already burdened with office stress, family pressures, and my own restless thoughts… exploded.

One word after another cut deep.
One sentence after another burned bridges.

When I told her, *"You don't even want to talk to me. You only talk out of formality. Earlier you used to talk for hours! Something has changed between us! You never share things with me like you do with your friends.*

She hit back harder.
"Exactly. With my friends I can share anything without thinking. But with you… I cannot. Because you won't understand the way they do."

That broke me.

I snapped. "If you have so many problems with me, then there's no point in this relationship."

And she, in her anger, said words that scarred me.
"You never ever wanted this relationship, Faaz. It's only because of me it even exists. But remember this day, I won't come back. This time, never."

My blood boiled. My pride screamed louder than my heart.

"If you have some manners, some self-respect… then don't call me again. This is done and dusted."

Her last words before cutting the call: *"As you wish. Bye."*

Silence.
The kind of silence that kills.

The car felt heavy as I finished telling it all. My cigarette had burned almost to the filter.

Mariyam exhaled deeply, her hand still on mine. She didn't look at me with pity, she looked at me with truth.

"Faaz," she said softly, "no matter whatever happens, you should never open your mouth when you're angry. Words said in anger… they don't heal. They ruin everything. In this case, she should have understood, that you cared, that you were waiting the whole day for her, that after your hectic office work, you only wanted to share your day with her so your stress would ease. But you too… you should have controlled yourself. Those words you threw at her… they cut deeper than you think."

Her words stayed with me, heavier than the cigarette smoke in the car.

*****

"Anger doesn't destroy situations. It destroys hearts. And once a heart is broken by words, no apology can glue it back the same way."

That night was the first night in our entire journey where we slept without sorting things out. I never knew that one small fight would turn into the biggest turn of my life.

Before this, no matter how big the argument, one of us would always give in. Either I would call her with a soft, guilty "Sorry Fajr…" or she would text me something stubborn yet cute like, *"Talking to me?"* — and just like that, the anger would melt away.

But this time, neither of us called. Neither of us texted. Ego was winning.

Two days passed. Silence.
Four days passed. Still no word.
By the seventh day, my heart couldn't take it anymore.

September 4, Wednesday!

Finally, I picked up my phone and sent her a message on WhatsApp:
"Sorry Fajr, let's not drag this anymore, please."

The message delivered. Two blue ticks. My heart started racing. She saw it. But no reply!

I instantly called her.

The moment she picked up, my first words burst out, "Sorry Fajr! Sorry baby… it happens, can't help it. Please let's end this fight."

Her reply was sharp, cold, and trembling with pain:
"Where were you these 7 days, Faaz? Seven days I cried, seven days I waited. Now you come with a sorry? No. I don't want to talk to you anymore. Please… don't text or call me again."

Those words hit me like a knife.

I sat frozen for a few seconds, my ears ringing. Regret came crashing down all at once.

It was 4:30 in the evening. I couldn't let it end like this. I needed to see her face, to stand in front of her, to beg her to look into my eyes once before she decided anything.

Within minutes, I inquired about the office cab routes. One of them used to go near RV College, the exact place where Noor got down every evening. Without wasting a second, I mailed the transport team: *"I have some work on this route, please allow me to travel in this cab today."*
It was just a formality, but to me it felt like I was writing my last chance.

I got into the cab, my heart heavy yet hopeful. I put on my earphones to calm myself down. And as if the universe wanted to test me, the very song that had defined us started playing — *"Perfect" by Ed Sheeran.*

That song pulled me straight into memories.

*****

It was her birthday, 20th October. I had planned everything, not expensive gifts, not fancy show-offs, just something from my heart. I had booked a small private corridor in a café, decorated the table with rose petals, a small cupcake, and a candle. I blindfolded her and walked her inside.

I still remember how she giggled the whole time, asking, "Faaz, what are you doing? Where are you taking me?" When I removed the blindfold, her eyes instantly filled with tears. Happy tears.

I asked her to make a wish and blow the candle. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, whispered something to herself, and blew it.
I sang softly, nervously: *"Happy birthday to you… happy birthday my lovely lady, my Fajr, my everything…"*

And then came the moment I was waiting for. “Baby, I have one more surprise for you,” I said, my voice shaking. “Close your eyes.”

She smiled shyly and obeyed.

When she opened them, she found me on my knees, holding a single rose.
“Noor… you are the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me. From the moment I first saw you, I knew my life would never be the same. I promise you… no matter what the situation is, I’ll never leave you. I’ll love you forever, ever and ever.”

Her face melted. She hugged me tight, tears rolling down her face. I kissed her forehead and handed her handwritten letters, filled with our photos, our first picture together, even that silly memory of my Vans shoes and her Bata pink shoes.

She held those letters close to her chest, whispering, *“This is all I ever wanted, Faaz.”*

That day, we even danced for the first time, awkward, clumsy, yet perfect in our own way. We laughed, we teased, we forgot the world. The candlelight lunch after that was the cherry on top. That day was too perfect to forget.

And now… in the cab, that same song, those same memories tore me apart.

The cab finally reached the RV College stop. I stepped out, my palms sweaty, heart beating like a drum.

This was the same place where countless evenings I had waited for her. No matter how angry or tired she was, the moment her eyes fell on me standing there, her mood instantly changed. That spark in her face, that was my home.

I stood there again, clutching my phone, rehearsing how I’d say sorry, how I’d make her forgive me, how I’d bring back that smile.

The office bus pulled up. People got down one by one. My eyes scanned desperately.

And then…
I saw her.

Noor.
My Fajr.

She wasn't ready.
Not for me. Not for this. Not for anything.

The moment her eyes met mine, they didn't shine like they used to. There was no warmth, no softness, just anger, exhaustion, and a wall that I couldn't climb no matter how hard I tried.

Every time, her office colleague Prarthana was beside her like a shield. I asked, "Prarthana, please… you go alone. I'll come with Noor."

Reluctantly, she left us. And now it was just me and her, but even in that closeness, I felt miles away.

Noor didn't look at me. Not even once. Her eyes stayed fixed somewhere else, anywhere but on mine.

Her voice cracked when she finally spoke:
"After everything… after all those words you threw at me… I couldn't sleep for days, Faaz. Days! And now you show up, just like that? Everything was perfect. But you… you always find a way to ruin it. You always mess things up. You never wanted me."

Each word was like glass cutting through me. I tried reaching for her hand, desperate. "Fajr, don't say that… please. I didn't mean it, you know I didn't. I said it in anger. Just once, try to understand me."

She turned to me with a sigh, her eyes still burning.
"You want me to forgive you, right?"

"Yes," I whispered instantly, without a second thought.

“Then I need time,” she said coldly. “Three months. Leave me alone.”

“Three months?” I almost choked. “Please… don’t do this to me. I can’t live like that. Don’t punish me like this. Please, Fajr.”

But she wasn’t bending. Not this time. “I’m going to my native today. If you want an answer right now… then it’s no, Faaz. I can’t do this anymore.”

Her words knocked the air out of me.
Baby, please… don’t. Not like this. I’ll change. I’ll fix everything. Just don’t end us.”

But my pleading fell on deaf ears. This wasn’t the Noor who forgave my childish mistakes, who melted at my apologies, who laughed in the middle of our fights and hugged me anyway. That Noor wasn’t here.

This Noor… was done.

“I don’t want this relationship anymore,” she said, her tone final, her eyes empty. “It’s done. It’s dusted. From my end, it’s over.”

And without a glance back, without even letting me hold her one last time, she walked away.

*****

While returning, I stood frozen at that bus stop, the same place that once witnessed our happiest evenings, now watching me crumble.

That night, I called her again and again. Each time, she cut the call. After continuously calling, she texted ‘Stop bothering me, leave me alone.’

The girl who once couldn’t go an hour without hearing my voice… now acted like my voice was poison.

How quickly days had changed. How suddenly the girl who used to travel with me… was traveling without me. How cruelly the girl who once clung to me for courage… now found courage in walking away.

And me? I was left behind, holding only memories and an apology that never reached her heart.

*****

A day or two passed. My phone remained quiet, my mind still heavy from everything that had happened. That's when Khadir came into the picture.

"Bhai, we're going to Coorg with the boys. You're coming."
At first, I refused. I wasn't in the mood. My chest still carried the weight of Noor's last words, her anger replaying in my head like a broken cassette. But Khadir wasn't someone who gave up easily. He must have sensed something, maybe from the way I had grown silent, withdrawn. Or maybe he just knew me too well. To ease the storm inside me, he offered a distraction, this trip.

Mariyam interrupted "Wait, our Khadir?" I said "Yes, our Khadir! And please let me continue the story." Mariyam giggled and kept quiet. I continued.

And honestly, when I looked around… there was no one in Bangalore. Even Noor was away. Staying alone in that PG room felt suffocating. So, reluctantly, I agreed.

We were six in total, me, Khadir, Madhan, Josh, Darshan, and Abhi.
We left Bangalore at night, by train to Mysore at first, then took bus from there to a town near Coorg. From there an off-road jeep to the destination. The roads wet from recent rain. By morning, around 10-11 am, **we reached Coorg.**

Coorg… ah, what a place. The hills wrapped themselves in mist like a bride in her veil. Coffee plantations stretched endlessly, their earthy fragrance hanging heavy in the damp air. Towering trees swayed, whispering secrets to the wind. Rain drizzled softly, painting the whole town in shades of green and grey. Even the silence had a sound, of streams gushing, of unseen birds calling from deep inside the forest.

The boys were excited, their chatter filling the air, but my mind… it was stuck. Stuck on Noor. Even in the beauty of Coorg, her absence screamed louder than anything else.

Darshan's dad owned a farmhouse there, hidden right in the middle of the jungle. About 4-5 kms from the main road, unreachable by vehicles. No autos, no bikes. Just a narrow muddy trail. We had to walk. Every step we took, deeper into that forest, it felt like we were leaving the real world behind.

When we reached the farmhouse, we expected something cozy, well-kept. But no, it had been abandoned for months. Dust, cobwebs, dampness everywhere. The caretaker, clearly, hadn't cared at all. We spent hours cleaning, arranging firewood, unpacking groceries we'd bought on the way.

And then… the madness began. We cooked, we laughed, we smoked, we danced like idiots. It was pure thrill. There wasn't even a 1% network inside, no calls, no messages, no internet. Just us, cut off from the entire world.

That night, we prepared barbeque outside the house. Pitch darkness around us, no streetlights, no electricity. Just a fire glowing red and our voices echoing in the silence of the jungle. It was equal parts exciting and terrifying.

We were eating, smoking, lost in conversation when it happened.

A sound. A rustle!!!

I turned. Two glowing eyes stared at us from the darkness. For a moment, I thought it was a stray dog. But then… one more pair of eyes appeared. And another. Soon, seven to ten wolves circled the area, their eyes gleaming like torches.

“Run!” I shouted.

We didn’t think twice. Half-eaten chicken, cigarettes, phones, everything was abandoned as we bolted inside the house. Hearts pounding, breaths heavy. For nearly two hours we sat inside, lights off, not daring to move. Only when the forest grew silent again did we step outside and gather our things.

That night, none of us slept properly.

The next morning, the jungle softened. Birds chirped, mist hung low, and sunlight trickled through the leaves. We went for a walk and saw elephants in the distance, deer darting through trees, peacocks spreading their feathers. It felt magical.

Later, we decided to go into town for breakfast. That’s when reality reminded me it still existed. As we searched desperately for a signal, my phone caught a faint bar. Just one.

And there it was.

A message.
From Noor. On Instagram.
She had replied to my story which I had posted before entering the jungle, almost 20 hours ago.

"Hey! Sorry for my rude behaviour. Trust me, your words hurt me a lot. Please give me some time. I’ll recover."

My heart leapt. For the first time in days, I felt alive again. Relief, happiness, hope, all rushing in at once. I wanted to reply immediately, to tell her how much I missed her, to ask her not to punish me with silence. But the network… gone. Just like that.

I told myself — *I'll text her later when the signal is stronger.* But fate had other plans.

We had little battery left in our phones. We used whatever charge we had to call parents, to pay bills in town because UPI didn't work properly there. I clicked a few pictures, posted something quickly, and then we headed back to the farmhouse.

And in that chaos, I forgot to text her back.

By evening, my phone was dead. And I never thought… this silly mistake, this delay of a few hours, would cost me more than I could ever imagine.

We stayed in Coorg for two days. Laughter, campfires, adventures, but somewhere in my chest, I carried an urgency. The weight of Noor's unread message.

Finally, we left Coorg early in the morning, reaching Bangalore late at night. Exhausted, dusty, drained.

The first thing I did when I entered my PG room wasn't to shower or eat. It was to charge my phone.

As soon as it lit up, I opened Instagram and typed —
"Hey sorry, just reached back Bangalore! Saw your message… wassup?"

I hit send with a sigh of relief.

Little did I know… I was already too late.

She had not replied for hours. My chest was heavy with every tick of the clock, so finally, I called her. Noor picked up instantly—her voice sharp, loaded, like she had been waiting just to yell.

"I texted you, Faaz! You were busy then, right? Now I'm busy. Don't disturb me."

Her words cut deep. I rushed to explain, "Noor, listen… we were in the middle of the jungle in Coorg, there was no network, no signal at all."

But before I could finish, she snapped, "Oh really? And how did you manage to get the network to post that story?"

I froze. My throat went dry. I tried my best to explain, to make her understand, but the more I spoke, the worse it got. She wasn't listening—she was accusing, twisting, bringing back every old mistake, every silly fight we ever had.

And then she said the words that pushed me to the edge—"The way you enjoyed your trip in Coorg, Faaz… I'll also go on a trip with my office colleagues. Raahul, Somanna, and the others. I'll wear shorts with them, I'll stay with them for 2–3 days. Would you be fine with that?"

Something inside me snapped. My patience, my silence, my endless efforts—it all burned out in a second. I shouted back, words I regretted the moment they left my mouth: *"Fine! Do whatever you want! It was my mistake to call you and apologize. You want to have fun with boys, right? Go and sleep with them! Don't fucking mess with me!"*

The silence after that line felt heavier than anything I had ever known. I knew I had crossed a line. I knew those words should never have been spoken, but Noor clung to them, repeating them again and again, framing me as the villain. I kept apologizing, begging, admitting it was anger, it was wrong. But she wouldn't forgive.

Her last words before cutting the call stabbed me harder than anything else:
"Tomorrow I'm going to Chennai on a business trip. I need to wake up at 5 am. You already ruined my life, now stop ruining my mood."

Click. Call ended.

The Night That Changed Everything

I stared at my phone screen in the dead silence of my PG room. My chest was burning. My heart was heavy. My mind was screaming. That night, at 1 a.m., I climbed to the terrace with a cigarette pack in hand—the habit I had quit long ago, but heartbreak has its way of calling back your old demons. I lit one, then another, inhaling the smoke with tears in my eyes, songs playing in the background, trying to stitch myself back together but failing miserably.

The next two days were a blur. I kept texting, kept calling, pouring my heart out in long paragraphs, begging for her to just reply once. But all I got was seen-zone. Silence. That silence killed me more than any harsh word.

And then… came the day I wish I could erase from my memory forever.

11th September. Again Wednesday.

Even today, saying that date makes my body tremble. That day destroyed everything. That day ripped us apart forever.

As I told this to Mariyam, my hands began to shake uncontrollably on the steering wheel. Tears filled my eyes, my heartbeat raced like it was trying to break free from my chest. The rain had completely stopped outside, but inside me, it was a storm I couldn't control.

Mariyam noticed. She immediately said, “Faaz, pull over. Please… stop the car.”

We had just reached the Tumkur toll gate. I pulled over to the side, breathing heavily, trying not to collapse under the weight of that memory. Mariyam quickly offered me water. I gulped it down, but my throat still felt like fire. I stepped out of the car, desperate for air.

She followed, quietly, gently. I stood in front of the car, staring at the dark highway, my hands trembling, my chest heaving. Mariyam came closer and without saying a word, she held my hand. Her touch was steady, warm—it grounded me.

For a moment, I let the silence speak. The world felt paused, like even time was waiting for me to breathe.

After a few minutes, I managed to calm myself. Mariyam sat on the bonnet of the car, watching me with eyes full of empathy. I reached for my cigarette pack, lit one, and inhaled deeply—the only instant relief I knew.

Mariyam finally spoke, her voice soft, almost whispering, “Faaz… I can’t even imagine the weight you’re carrying. I don’t know if I’ll ever find the right words to console you, but listen to me—keeping this storm inside you will only destroy you more. Share it with me. Everything. Don’t hold back. You’ll feel lighter. And…” She paused, her eyes searching mine. “…as far as I’ve heard your story, you two were perfect for each other. Maybe this isn’t the end. Maybe she will come back to you.”

Her words lingered in the night air. For the first time in hours, I felt like I wasn’t completely alone.

The highway roared faintly in the background, but around us… it was just stillness. Suspense. The kind that weighs on your chest.

I dropped the cigarette, crushed it under my shoe, and whispered, almost to myself: ***“11th September… the day love turned into my worst nightmare.”***

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It was around 9 p.m. when I exhaled deeply and said to Mariyam, “Let’s get into the car.” She nodded silently, and we both slipped inside. The engine roared to life, headlights cutting through the damp highway darkness. For a while, only the hum of the car filled the air. Then I broke the silence.

“Listen, Mariyam… I’ll tell you what happened that day.” My voice was heavy, almost shaking.

I took a breath and began.

“It was a Wednesday again. The day I thought I could fix everything. I had prepared myself—whatever it takes, I’ll make Noor understand me. I didn’t mean the angry words I had said earlier. If possible, I was ready to sit on my knees, fold my hands, even do sit-ups if that’s what it took. Anything. Anything to rebuild what we had.”

My throat tightened as the memory unfolded. “That morning, I wore something special—a grey Lacoste polo shirt and black jeans. I had bought them long ago, waiting for the right day to wear them. That day felt… important. After the office, I rushed to meet Noor. But unlike before, this time I wasn’t excited. I was terrified. My hands were trembling as her office bus arrived. She stepped down… and the moment her eyes met mine, disappointment clouded her face. She didn’t want to see me. She didn’t want to talk. She just wanted to escape into her PG.”

I tightened my hold on the wheel, the knuckles of my hand whitening.

"I walked beside her, begging. 'Baby, please. Fajr, please, forgive me. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry…' I must have said it fifty times in that two-kilometer walk. But she wouldn't even look at me. It felt like she had already decided—like someone else had taken her heart away."

Mariyam's silence was like a mirror; I could feel her listening intently.

"I begged her until we reached near her PG. Finally, I asked—just two minutes, that's all I needed. She stopped, reluctantly. I looked her in the eyes and said, 'Please tell me honestly. Do you really not want this relationship? Do you really not want me in your life? Are you happy without me, without us?'"

My voice cracked as I recalled her reply***. "She didn't even pause to think. She just lifted her chin, arrogant, cold, and said, 'Listen, I don't want this relationship. I'm very much happy without you. Please, for God's sake, leave me alone.'"***

The words cut through me again as I spoke them aloud.

"I told her 'Fine.' Delete everything—my number, my photos, our photos, even my mom's and my sister's numbers. Do it now."

"And she did. Just like that. Without a second thought. She smiled sarcastically and deleted everything in front of me."

I swallowed hard. "I took her phone from her hand. I never wanted to check her phone before, not once in our relationship. But something about her eyes that moment—there was discomfort, fear. Like she was hiding something. And I was right. On WhatsApp, I saw her chats with some guy I didn't know. They were close, too close. When I asked, she brushed it off as a prank—said her roommate Nihar had put her up to it. But then…" My voice went low, trembling. "…then I opened the gallery, hidden pictures."

I paused, my hands shaking on the wheel as though I was back in that exact second.

“What I saw there… I’ll never forget. I can never forget. My heart froze. My body turned cold. I handed the phone back to her, my voice barely a whisper. I asked, ‘Please, explain this to me. Tell me what I saw isn’t true.’”

A single tear rolled down my cheek. “But she didn’t even blink. She snapped at me—"YOU DON’T HAVE THE FUCKING RIGHTS TO ASK ME. This is my life, and I’ll do whatever makes me happy.”

I looked at Mariyam then, my eyes burning. “Do you know how it feels to look into the eyes of the person you loved more than yourself, and see no guilt at all? Nothing. Like it was intentional. Like breaking me was her mission.”

I clenched my jaw. “I tried… I swear to God, I tried to control my anger. But something inside me snapped. I lifted my hand… and I slapped her. Hard. The girl I loved more than life itself. My Noor.”

Mariyam gasped softly. “Faaz! I can’t believe this. Are you serious?”

“Yes,” I whispered, tears streaming down. “I slapped my love of life, in front of everyone, in the middle of the road. And then… I walked away. I didn’t ask her a single question after that. I just left.”

The memory suffocated me as I continued. “On the way back to the metro station, I cried like hell. I couldn’t breathe, I vomited on the footpath. A sharp ringing sound filled my ears—like the world itself was collapsing inside me. Somehow, I pulled out my phone and called Khadir. My voice was broken when I said, ‘Khadir, I slapped Noor. I slapped her.’”

I sniffed, trying to steady myself. "He was shocked. He kept asking where I was, telling me to wait so he could come. But I told him no, I'd manage. I'd go back on my own. I sat there on the footpath for a long while, throwing up, crying, trying to hold myself together. And then… I left. I took an auto and went back to Khadir's place."

The car went quiet again. Only the road stretched ahead, endless.

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The biggest mistake of my life was that slap. But the second biggest mistake—I did it right after.

While returning back to Khadir's place in that auto, my head was spinning. My body was numb. A strange hollowness was crawling inside me. Out of nowhere, my trembling hands went to my pocket. I pulled out my phone, unlocked it, and stared at our picture—me and Noor, smiling like the whole world was ours.

Something snapped inside me. Out of hate, out of pain, out of helplessness… I opened the dial pad and called Noor's mother's number.

She picked up. Her tone was normal, warm even. "Hello, who?"

My throat was dry, but words came out. *"Aunty… I'm extremely sorry. I slapped Noor today… in the middle of the road. I saw something I was not supposed to see. I couldn't control myself… I couldn't manage my anger. I'm really, really sorry, aunty."*

At first, she was surprisingly calm. Gentle, almost motherly. She asked me what exactly happened. I couldn't tell her the truth of what I saw—I didn't have the courage. I just repeated, "I saw something which I wasn't supposed to see… hitting her was my biggest mistake. Please forgive me."

For a moment, she listened like she understood. But then she asked softly, *"Beta, what's your name?"*

I swallowed hard. *"Fahad,"* I said.

Her reply hit me like a thousand knives. *"She never talked about you to me. First time I'm hearing your name."*

I froze. My heart sank deeper than it ever had. Somehow, I still asked, *"Aunty… she never mentioned that we love each other? Never? Not even once?"*

Her reply was like thunder on a clear sky. *"Never, beta. I never allowed her for these things, and trust me, she never ever talked about you to me."*

I was silent. The auto kept moving, but inside me, the world had stopped.

We talked for more than thirty-five minutes. Strangely, in between, aunty herself started apologizing to me for her daughter's behavior. I couldn't understand. I kept saying, *"Aunty, you don't have to be sorry. I'm the one who's sorry… I'm sorry for what I did."*

But her words carried a hidden weight. She warned me clearly, politely but firmly—*"Beta, please stay away from Noor. I will never let her marry anyone of her choice. She has to marry the guy I will choose for her. That's the condition I have kept for her."*

That was it. That moment I realized—she wasn't just being protective. She was manipulating me. She was lying to me. Fooling me. Playing with both my guilt and my brokenness.

I wanted to scream, but I didn't. My voice was barely holding. I simply agreed, *"Aunty… after what I saw today, trust me, I will never ever call or text her. You have my word."*

I cut the call, and for a few seconds, I just sat frozen, the phone heavy in my hand.

Mariyam, who was quietly listening as I narrated all this in the car, turned her head slowly towards me. Her eyes were searching mine, almost afraid to ask the question forming on her lips.

“Faaz…” she whispered, her voice trembling, “what did you actually see?”

I replied to Mariyam gently, my voice low and steady, *“I never spoke to anyone about what I saw… and I never will.”*

After reaching home, Khadir kept asking me what had happened, why I had done that. But I didn’t speak to him—I couldn’t. My words were stuck somewhere deep in my chest. I never wanted to explain.

That night, I tried to sleep, but the moment kept rolling in my head again and again like a broken record. My heartbeat raced, my eyes burned with tears, and a sharp pain pierced my head. I couldn’t escape it.

The weight of that one act crushed me so badly that I fell ill for two days straight. I couldn’t get up from bed, my body weak, my mind restless. Panic attacks gripped me every time the incident replayed in my memory. The truth hit me harder than anything—I had done what I once swore I never would. I had raised my hand on the love of my life.

I remembered that one night, long before this incident. I was in my PG when my mom called. She told me about one of my relatives—out of anger, he had slapped his wife. I remember the disgust that filled me at that moment. After the call, I couldn’t sit still. I instantly dialed Noor’s number.

I knew it was late—around 11:45 p.m.—and she would already be asleep. Still, I wanted to hear her voice, to make her understand. She picked up, a little panicked by the late-night call.

“Calm down, baby,” I said, *“please just listen to me. I need to tell you something.”*

I explained the situation to her—what I'd just heard from my mom. Then I said the words I thought would always remain true: *"Baby, whatever happens between us, no matter what, I'm never ever going to hit you. Not now, not ever in the future. That's my promise to you."*

Her voice came soft, proud, loving: *"Faaz, I know you very well. I'm so proud of you. I trust you a lot… I'll never let you do anything in your angry mood. You have my words too."*

I still remember that moment, word by word. It was etched in me like a vow carved into stone.

I turned to Mariyam and continued, my chest heavy, *"She had such good control over my anger, Mariyam. No matter how furious I was… the second I saw her face, my anger would melt away. I was like a grenade, and she… she was the pin that held me together."*

A faint smile passed over my lips as memories flooded back. *"She always used to tell me—'The way you're protective, caring, loving, and the way you manage all my mood swings… no one will ever give me that. You're too perfect for me.'* And I would always reply, *'And you're perfect for me too. We're perfect for each other.'"*

I chuckled softly, a bitter sweetness in my voice. *"Whenever she was in a very good mood—when she got extra loving—she used to call me Mumma. Like, 'Mumma, let's go there! Mumma, I want this! Mumma, I love you.' To her, I was the second most important person in her world. The first was always her actual mother."*

Mariyam, who was quietly absorbing every word, asked softly, *"Faaz… what about her father?"*

I sighed deeply. *"I told you, right? Her father passed away when she was in the 6th standard."*

For a moment, silence filled the car—just the sound of the engine humming and the road stretching endlessly ahead.

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Desperate Attempts

"I desperately wanted to talk to her. I wanted to see her. I wanted *her*. I wanted the old us back," I told Mariyam, my voice almost breaking as the memories flooded in.

"I texted her using my friends' phones—whenever she realized it was me, she blocked the number. But I didn't stop. I borrowed everyone's phone I could, just to send her a message. Just to hear back even one line. Just to sort things out between us."

"I had promised her… no matter what happens, I'll stay. Forever. And when I said forever, I meant it. My love wasn't something that could end with a mistake or a hurdle. Forever meant *forever*. But she… she didn't want to hear it anymore."

Mariyam stayed silent, watching me, her eyes soft with empathy.

"In just a month," I continued, "I tried contacting her more than fifty times. Different numbers, different ways. I created more than fifteen email IDs—just to send her letters, to remind her of the happy moments, the promises, the dreams we shared."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Not a single reply. Not one. The silence… it was unbearable. I was suffocating in it. I was depressed, mentally drained, frustrated. I couldn't focus on work, couldn't focus on life. It felt like my soul had been ripped out."

The words were getting heavier now, my voice lower. "That's when I started smoking again. At first, just one or two… but soon it became my only escape. Whenever I felt like crying, whenever the stress built up so much I couldn't breathe—I lit a cigarette.

Fifteen… sometimes more in a single day. My body was breaking, but my mind—my mind was already gone."

Mariyam turned her head, quietly absorbing every word, but I didn't stop.

"I barely ate once a day. Not because I wasn't hungry… but because the pain was eating me alive from inside. I was becoming mad—literally losing myself. My health dropped so badly that I ended up with low BP. I still remember the IV drips in my hand, lying there and still… still thinking only of Noor. Just her."

A silence stretched for a few moments inside the car.

"My parents finally noticed. They saw me falling apart, physically and mentally. They forced me to tell them why. And I… I confessed. I told them I slapped her, and because of that, she left me. But the truth—what I saw that day, the real reason why I lost control—" I shook my head slowly, "I never told anyone. Not my parents. Not Khadir. Not even my closest friends. I carried that truth alone."

"You won't believe it, Mariyam," I said, my voice dropping lower, almost trembling. "I texted her *everywhere*. On all platforms—Pinterest, LinkedIn, Snapchat, even on PhonePe and Google Pay. I left her messages on places no one would even think of… But all I ever got in return was just *block*. No words. Nothing. Silence… rejection… again and again."

I rubbed my forehead, the memory still burning. "Finally, I decided… enough. I couldn't take it anymore. I would meet her face-to-face. I would show her what I was going through. Maybe then she'd realise."

It was the evening of **9th October**. I had convinced Khadir to come with me. We went to the same spot where I had met her countless times before, the place where love once bloomed. Now I was standing there like a beggar, chain-smoking to ease my mind.

I turned to Khadir and whispered, "You know, the reason I quit smoking before… was Noor. Just because she hated it. Now the same Noor has pushed me back into it. It's ironic, isn't it?"

Khadir patted my back, but I could see the worry in his eyes. I tried to reassure him, "Once she comes, I'll kneel down right there, hold my ears, beg her. She will see my suffering, she'll forgive me. I know she will."

But life never listens to our rehearsed lines.

Noor came. She was waiting at the stop, her hair brushing lightly in the wind, her eyes restless. My heart almost stopped beating. For a moment, hope surged in me. But then, her roommate Nihar joined her. Together they entered a beauty parlour nearby.

Me and Khadir waited outside. I smoked again, pacing. Khadir tried lightening the mood, "Bro, look at her—she's grooming herself. And you… with this beard, this grown hair, you look like a man defeated in love. Bitter truth, bro."

I shot him a strange look, half-angry, half-broken. He didn't know what storm was inside me.

I had no courage to face her. My body was trembling, my throat was dry, sweat trickled down my palms. For safety, I had written a long letter for her—pages of my heart spilled out, explaining everything, asking forgiveness again and again. Maybe if she read it later, she would soften, she would reach out.

Khadir took the letter from me. "If she refuses to talk, at least she'll read this." He quietly slipped it inside Noor's shoes outside the parlour.

Minutes later, around *7:30 PM,* Noor and Nihar stepped out. While putting her shoes back on, she noticed the folded paper. She froze. She looked around, her eyes scanning, searching for who

had placed it there. I hid behind a tree with Khadir, watching her every move, my heart hammering.

She picked the letter but didn't read it immediately. Instead, she and Nihar started walking back towards their PG. That's when me and Khadir followed.

Suddenly, Noor saw me—just 8 or 10 meters away. Her eyes widened, and instantly, she quickened her pace, like she had seen a ghost. Like she didn't want to breathe the same air as me.

I couldn't stop myself. I ran ahead, stood beside her, my voice desperate:
"Fajr, please! Just listen to me… give me one minute. One single minute, that's all I ask."

But she panicked. She placed both her hands over her eyes and screamed, "Please! Don't do anything! Please leave me alone!"

Her words cut me deeper than any knife could. My Noor—my love—was afraid of me? The girl who once held my face in her hands, promising forever, was now looking at me like I was a villain.

I tried standing in front of her, blocking her path. "Please, Noor, just see me once. Look at me, see what I've become without you. Please… just once."

In my heart, I imagined her breaking down, hugging me tightly, both of us crying, finally healing. But reality… reality was cruel.

She tried to step back, but I grabbed her office bag to stop her. In fear, she let go, leaving it right there on the road, and ran—ran towards her PG as if it was the only safe zone left in the world.

Nihar rushed forward, picked up her bag, and looked at me with anger and pity. "Please don't do this, yaar. She's already going through too much. Because of you, she's started taking therapy. Just leave her alone. Give her space."

Those words hit me like thunder. My chest tightened, heartbeat racing so fast I thought I would collapse right there. *Therapy?* My Noor? Because of *me*?

Before I could process anything, Khadir came, held my shoulders, and pulled me back. “Bas, bhai. Let’s go.”

I didn’t resist. My body was trembling. My heart was in pieces. My mind was screaming. I walked back like a defeated man, my soul crushed under the weight of her fear.

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After telling Mariyam everything, I slightly adjusted my seat, exhausted. My throat was dry, but it wasn’t from talking—it was from reliving each wound, each scar, all over again.

I turned to her and asked softly, “Mariyam… are you okay?”

She blinked twice, her eyes still heavy from the storm of emotions I had poured out. She gave me a small, faint smile and replied, “Yeah… I’m fine. It’s just… I’m surprised. You’ve gone through a lot, Faaz. Before you started the story, I was kind of happy, excited to hear it… but now… after listening to each and everything, I’m feeling a little heavy. Like I wasn’t prepared for this.”

Her voice was calm, but her words carried weight. She was processing it deeply, trying not to show too much, but her eyes betrayed her.

Then she asked, with hesitation, “Did she ever… contact you after 11th September? Did she ever meet you again?”

I nodded slowly, staring at the ground. “Yes… only once.”

Mariyam leaned forward, waiting.

I took a deep breath and continued. “After that incident… the feeling I had for Noor didn’t fade. If anything, it grew stronger.

The urge to talk to her, to hear her voice, to see her… it consumed me. But at the same time, there was another side to her—this cruel, distant side—that was killing me. I never expected that from her."

I paused, looking away, my voice lowering. "This was the same girl who once cared for me more than anyone else. Whenever I sneezed or coughed, she used to panic, saying, *'Why are you sneezing? Go to the doctor, please take proper care of your health. You're very important to me. Don't skip tablets, don't ignore your health.'* She kept track of every little thing. She wouldn't sleep until she knew I was fine."

My throat tightened as I spoke the next words. "But now… I was admitted to the hospital several times. Coughing nonstop, doctors warning me to quit smoking, drips on my hand, my body weak. I was on that hospital bed, half broken, half alive… and she wasn't there. Not even once. If I had died that time… I know it, Mariyam… she wouldn't have even visited me. She had turned so stone-hearted."

"The girl who once couldn't see me sneeze… couldn't even care if I lived or died."

The car fell silent after that. Only the hum of the engine and the sound of tires rolling against the road remained. Mariyam sat beside me, her hands folded in her lap, her expression heavy—like she was carrying part of my pain now.

The car kept moving, headlights cutting through the road towards Bangalore. I adjusted the rear-view mirror, not because I needed to, but because I didn't want Mariyam to see the moisture forming in my eyes. My voice grew heavier as I continued,

"Mariyam… here I was, struggling day by day. My health was getting worse. Every single cough felt like it was tearing my chest apart. But for Noor… it was like she was already moving into another phase. She was trying to be happy with her comfort circle—the people who clapped for her decisions, who kept telling

her *'you're doing the right thing, you're so strong, you're doing good.'* Her colleagues…her roommate…. And her mom."

I sighed, tightening my grip on the steering wheel. "Her mom… played the smartest role. She had been waiting for this moment. She saw her chance and… she used it. She painted me black, made me the villain in every story. She told Noor, *'He's always been like this. He never had good intentions for you.'* She used the victim card so perfectly that she even convinced her own daughter. My Noor… my Fajr… was brainwashed completely."

I shook my head slowly, my jaw stiff. "But at the same time, her mom's act… couldn't be judged completely, because she only knew half of the story. She only saw the bad side. No one from her family, from her circle, knew how much I cared. No one knew the countless things I did—because I never told anyone. I kept it all between me and Noor."

The road was quiet, the glow of road lights flashing rhythmically across Mariyam's face as she listened silently. I went on, my tone sharper now.

"They don't know, Mariyam… how many times I waited outside our college just to pick her up safely. How many nights I sacrificed my sleep, just to keep talking with her because she couldn't sleep. How I cut off my female friends completely—because she didn't like it. They don't know the pain I saw her go through during her periods, how I was there—buying her pads, chocolates, writing her handwritten letters, even getting her a massager just to ease her cramps. I noticed every tiny detail, every discomfort."

My throat went dry. I reached for the bottle of water near the dashboard, took a sip, and continued, my voice trembling.

"And … if my intentions were bad, then why did I take her to meet my parents? Why did I involve my family? Why did I plan a

future, a marriage, a home with her? Do people with bad intentions do all this?"

I let out a broken laugh. "But after everything, what am I now? A villain. To her mom, to her colleagues, to her people—I'm the monster who played with her, the guy who just wanted fun, who had bad intentions. No one talks about the surprise meet-ups, the gifts, the way I traveled across half of Bangalore just to make her smile. No one talks about the times we traveled together when I stayed awake just so she could sleep peacefully without worrying about her safety. Nobody remembers those things. All they remember is the story Noor sold to them."

The steering wheel felt hot under my palms as I whispered, "Now I'm hearing people say I just wanted to use her… that I played with her. But the truth, is… she was the only one I ever wanted to marry."

The car grew heavy with silence. Only the faint hum of the engine and the occasional horn outside filled the void.

Mariyam didn't interrupt—her face was turned towards the window, but I could see her reflection in the glass. Her eyes were glossy, her lips pressed together tightly, as if holding back the weight of everything she had just heard.

I took a deep breath, my eyes fixed on the endless stretch of road ahead. Mariyam hadn't said a word, but her silence was urging me to continue.

"Just to talk to Noor… I did something I had never done in my entire life. I contacted people I swore I would never even message—her roommates. I never texted them, never even tried. But this time… it was high time. I thought maybe they'd help. But the moment I texted them, they directly blocked me. On my face. Do you know how bad that felt? Like begging for one chance to speak, and instead getting a door slammed."

I exhaled hard, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

"And then… I even reached out to her office colleagues. Raahul. Pallavi. And Somanna." My voice dropped low with his name. "I tried every possible way. Every possible route. But the result? Zero. In their eyes, I was already the villain. There was no way out."

A bitter laugh escaped my lips as I shook my head. "I still remember what happened with Somanna. One of her office colleagues. I got his number through a mutual friend who worked in the same company as Noor. I texted him on WhatsApp, just a normal conversation at first. I found out he was planning to shift jobs since he was from electrical. And you know me, Mariyam, I'm not the type to hold grudges. I even helped him. I passed him information—that our company was looking for electrical engineers, that his profile would fit. I forwarded it to him."

I paused, then muttered, "But the hate he carried for me… it came out soon. It started casually, then he threw it straight in my face—*'What Noor did to you was absolutely right.'*"

I turned slightly toward Mariyam, her eyes widening with disbelief.

"Tell me, who is he to decide that? Who is he to lecture me about my own life? I couldn't hold back. I replied to every single line. If he abused, I abused back. Then… he crossed a line. He started talking about my parents. About my dad. That was it. He was doing everything just to trigger me. He didn't know who I was, what I could do. He thought I'd just sit quiet."

The anger came back as I recalled it. My voice hardened.

"Still, even then, I controlled myself. I swallowed my pride because I had one focus—Noor. I asked him straight: *'Can you help me talk to her? Just once? Directly?'* He said 'no' without hesitation. Then I warned him. I said, *'Brother, I've heard about how you are. How you were in your previous company? Take this as a warning—I trust Noor a*

lot, but I don't trust you. From day one, she called you brother, so be her brother. Don't cross the line, or you'll have to face me."

I clenched my jaw, replaying his reply in my head. "And you know what he said? He laughed. He said, ***'She thinks of me as a brother, but I don't feel the same for her.'***

"My patience snapped. I asked him straight: *'Tell me where you are. I'll come to you. We'll talk face-to-face. I won't hit you, I won't hurt you, but be a man. Let's talk like men.'* And his reply, Mariyam…" I chuckled bitterly, shaking my head. "He said, *'Bro, you don't afford the expense to come and meet me.'*"

The car filled with silence, except for the sound of my laughter—sharp, pained, sarcastic.

"This bald guy, telling me I can't afford to meet him. The phone he was typing from was equal to the cost of my AirPods. He didn't even know a damn thing about me—I was earning six digits then! But in his head, I was a loser, a villain, because that's the story Noor fed him. She only told them the bad parts, never the good. Never the sacrifices. Never the truth."

I sighed, loosening my grip on the wheel. "In the end… I didn't waste my energy proving him wrong. I left him to live in his delusion. Bald idiot."

I let the words hang, the car rolling into the night. Mariyam glanced at me, her lips slightly parted, like she wanted to say something but couldn't find the right words.

I took a deep breath and glanced at Mariyam for a second, then fixed my eyes back on the road.

"My sister was the one who got most tensed… she saw me every day, how I was drowning inside. I still remember one day in the office—I was already broken because of Noor's behavior, overthinking her every word, her every silence. My shift had just ended, I was sitting on my workbench, completely lost. That's

when mom called. She casually asked, 'What are you doing?' and I, already in that weak state, just said, 'Nothing mom… nothing.'"

I paused, the memory tightening my throat even as I spoke.

"Just by hearing my voice, she got scared. She kept asking me again and again what happened. I tried so hard to control myself… but I couldn't. I broke down. I cried. Not just normal tears—I cried like hell. I couldn't stop. My voice was trembling, my chest felt like it was tearing open. For those five minutes, I wasn't able to talk… only cry. For the first time, she was seeing me crying, and when my mother heard me like that, she too started crying on the phone. She begged me, again and again, to tell her what happened. Somehow, I managed to cover it up, told her, 'Office pressure, nothing else.' But the truth… she knew. A mother always knows what her son is really going through."

The headlights of the car caught a curve in the road. I slowed slightly, my grip on the steering wheel tightening.

"My sister overheard that conversation between me and mom. That night, she called me and said, 'Bhai, I'll talk to Noor. I'll make her understand. She will listen to me.' And she really did talk to her. But… she never told me exactly what she said."

Mariyam leaned slightly towards me, curious. "Then what happened?"

I let out a faint smile as another memory surfaced. "One fine day… I was at a hospital. Not admitted this time, I had just gone to see one of my friends there. I was alone, and I stepped into a small cafeteria—just a little shop. I ordered coffee, and while paying through PhonePe, something strange happened… something I never expected."

Mariyam tilted her head, her eyes widening. "What happened, Faaz?"

I smiled faintly, eyes still fixed on the road. "I got a text. From *Fajr* . A simple 'hi.' you won't believe it—my hands started

shaking so much that the hot coffee spilled on my hand. But I didn't care. In just a fraction of a second, I replied. I didn't even send one message—I sent five! For one single 'hi.'"

I laughed under my breath at the memory, though it carried more pain than joy now. "I wrote, 'Thank God! Finally, I got a text from you. I'm so happy. Finally!' I poured my happiness into those messages. But…"

My voice dropped low. "Her reply shattered me. She wrote, 'Don't be happy. I only texted you because your sister told me to.'"

"That one line… it took away all my joy. I felt my whole chest sink. And then she continued—'Your sister is telling me to meet you, and I should clearly talk to you about everything. So I'm thinking to meet you.'"

My eyes softened as I spoke, a helpless smile curling on my lips. "I instantly said, 'Okay, whenever you say. I'm free, you just tell me the date and time—I'll be there.' She replied, 'Yeah okay, give me some time to think. And till then, for God's sake, don't text me anything. I just texted you because your sister told me to. Don't expect anything from me.'"

I sighed, feeling that same ache even while narrating. "I said, 'Okay, take care.' She saw the message. And ignored it. No reply after that."

Mariyam turned her face slightly towards me, her silence heavy.

"I couldn't wait. I instantly dialed my sister's number and asked her, 'What did you tell Noor?' But she didn't reveal anything. She kept it to herself. Still… I was happy. Because finally, after everything, Noor agreed to meet me."

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The Mall of Memories

Fourteen days felt like fourteen years. Each morning I woke up hoping for a message, each night I went to sleep replaying our memories like a broken record. And then finally—it came.

"Tomorrow. 12:30 pm. Global Mall."

The words lit up my screen like fire. I stared at them again and again, making sure they were real. My heart leapt, my breath grew heavy. I replied instantly: *"Okay, I'll be there on time."*

That night, sleep abandoned me. I lay on my bed rehearsing everything in my head—what should I say, how should I convince her, how could I remind her of the happiness we once had? Over and over, I pictured the scene: her smile, her forgiveness, my arms around her as I handed her a chocolate and a red rose. Yes… I would hug her tight, in front of everyone, and I would finally propose.

The next morning, I was ready before time—10 am sharp. The journey was 25 km from my new rented home, but my excitement erased the distance. On the way, I stopped at a store, bought the chocolate and the rose, tucked them safely in my jacket, and whispered a silent prayer.

I reached the Global Mall ahead of schedule. My hands typed quickly: *"I reached."*

Her reply came, casual and distant: *"On the way. Another 10 mins."*

Those ten minutes felt like ten lifetimes. My heart pounded as I walked to the ground floor. Memories hit me like waves—this was the same place where we had once sat for half an hour, talking about life so seriously, so deeply. I stood there for a while, remembering her laughter echoing against the mall walls, her hand brushing mine as we walked together.

I was hoping she would choose that same spot. That maybe she would feel what I was feeling. But just as I let that hope build, a message buzzed in.

"Come to food court."

I quickly typed back: *"Last time we were sitting at the ground. That place is nice… come here only, we can talk peacefully."*

Her reply was cut sharp: *"If you wanna come upstairs, come. Otherwise, I'm leaving."*

It was clear now. She hadn't come with her heart—she had come for my sister's sake.

My steps grew heavy as I took the escalator up, but deep inside a foolish hope still lived. Maybe she would run to me, maybe she would hug me tight, forgetting the crowd, forgetting the world.

But the reality waiting at the food court was different.

There she was.

Noor.

In a pink pullover and blue jeans, sitting stiff in the middle of the noisy crowd. My heart jumped, but then… froze. Because she wasn't alone.

Beside her, a man.

My eyes narrowed. My pulse quickened. For two seconds, I couldn't breathe.

I walked closer, and recognition hit me. Raahul. Her office colleague. The same one she always called *"brother, brother"* from day one.

He threw me a strange look. Before I could speak, Noor insisted he shift away. He nodded, stood up, and moved two benches behind, leaving us face-to-face.

I sat down across from her. Silence. Just silence.

Our eyes locked. Five whole minutes passed, not a word spoken, only tears welling in both. It was like two souls screaming, but lips sealed.

Finally, she broke it. “Say what you want to say, Faaz. And please… finish it quickly.”

I swallowed hard, gathered myself, and spoke softly. “I’m sorry, Noor. For everything. My behavior, my words, my mistakes… I never wanted this. Not for me, not for you. You know me… you know how I am. Please… forgive me.”

Her eyes brimmed, tears spilling for a moment. She whispered, “Forgiven.”

That one word gave me a surge of confidence. I leaned forward, my voice trembling but hopeful. I explained everything—what had happened in Coorg, why I couldn’t text her on time, every single detail. I reminded her of our good memories, the long walks, the laughter, the countless hours together.

But her face… her face was strange. It wasn’t my Noor. It was like someone else had taken her place. Her replies felt rehearsed, mechanical. Like she had been told exactly what to say if Faaz begged, if Faaz apologized, if Faaz promised. She was listening, yes, but her soul wasn’t allowed to respond.

Still, she didn’t leave. Ten minutes turned into thirty, thirty into an hour, an hour into three. She stayed, listening to every word, yet reacting like a stranger. Her eyes betrayed her—deep inside, I could see she wanted to forgive me, she wanted to come back. But someone’s grip was stronger. Someone was manipulating her, controlling her heart.

At the end, my voice broke as I asked again, “Please, Noor… forgive me. Come back to me. I promise—I’ll send my parents tomorrow itself. No delays. We’ll get married. The marriage you always dreamed of, the one you used to remind me about every single day… let’s make it real now. Please.”

She looked away. Her lips trembled. And then she said the words that crushed me:

"I don't want you anymore. I only came here to end this properly. That's it."

My chest caved in. All the dreams I had carried in my heart for weeks, all the expectations of this meeting—they collapsed in an instant. I tried, I pleaded, I reminded her of everything she once wished for. But she was firm, repeating what she had been told to repeat.

Finally, I whispered, "I'll wait for you. No matter what. Whenever you feel like talking, just ping me—I'll be there. I'll wait for you my whole life, Noor. Because I promised you once—I'll never leave you. And my love… it's forever."

Her eyes softened, shining with tears she was trying to hide. She whispered back, "I won't block you. I have your number. I'll text when I feel like. And no one knows what is written in our destiny who knows I may agree to marry you or may be not!" Her voice said one thing. Her eyes said another.

And then… at that very moment, as if fate was mocking me, music from a nearby speaker filled the food court.

Lag jaa gale… ke phir yeh haseen raat ho na ho…

Shaayad, Phir iss janam mein mulaqaaat ho na hooo….

The song wrapped around us like a cruel reminder. Maybe this was our last meeting. Maybe fate wouldn't bring us together again.

Our eyes met again, holding each other for more than a minute—silent, broken, desperate.

I finally asked, "Why did you bring Raahul with you?"

Her answer stabbed me like a knife. "For my safety. Did you forget? You slapped me in front of everyone. That's why."

My heart cracked open. The flower, the chocolate, the dream of hugging her—they all turned to dust.

I stood up. Forced a smile. “Take care, Noor. Bye, Raahul.”

And then I walked away. Without turning back. Without looking again. Because if I did… I wouldn’t have had the strength to leave at all.

Mariyam was just staring at me—her eyes wide, moist, trembling with emotion. She had been listening so quietly, but now I could see her lips quivering, as if she wanted to say something but couldn’t find the right words.

Finally, she whispered, her voice breaking, “Faaz… how did you survive that day? I’m just listening, and my heart is tearing apart. I can’t imagine how you walked out of that mall, carrying all that pain, with no one by your side.”

Her tears slipped before she could hide them. She quickly brushed them away, but her voice cracked again. “You loved her with all your heart… and still, she couldn’t see it. You didn’t deserve that. Not you.”

She leaned back, exhaling deeply, as if she herself had just lived through the three-hour conversation, the silence, the heartbreak, the song in the background.

“Faaz,” she said softly, looking at me with a kind of ache in her eyes, “that wasn’t just a goodbye… it was like losing a part of your soul. And still, you… you promised to wait for her.” She shook her head slowly, half in disbelief, half in sorrow.

For the first time since I started narrating, I saw Mariyam’s strength melt. She wasn’t just listening anymore—she was feeling every wound, every scar, as if it were her own.

*****

I was driving in silence for a while, lit a cigarette! the smoke curling from my cigarette into the night air. Inside my head, I was still thinking—*how is Mariyam understanding me this deeply?* She was just 10! but the way she connected with my story, the way she reacted… it amazed me. It felt like she was reading my soul with every word I said. And strangely, it felt good—like finally someone was walking with me through this storm.

Then her soft voice broke the silence.
"Phir aage kya hua, Faaz?"

I took a long drag, let the smoke fade out through the window, and leaned deeper into my seat. "After that, meet with Noor, one thing became clear—someone is manipulating her. Sooner or later, she'll realise it. She'll come back. She has to. I kept faith."

I paused, watching the headlights cut through the highway ahead. "I didn't text her for one month. Not a word. But in my heart, I was still living for her. Everything I did, everything I touched—it was all connected to her somehow. I even bought a Persian cat—Noor loved cats. Cats were her 3rd most loved thing after me and her mom. Maybe I wasn't her 2nd love anymore, but at least Dua, that cat, could remind me of her smile."

I continued, "Me and Khadir had rented a flat. Noor used to dream about it—she'd say, *'take a flat, Faaz… on weekends I'll come, I'll cook for you.'* I took it now, but she wasn't there. I was the one trying to cook by looking at her old recipes which she had prepared just for me, pretending she'd walk in any minute."

I gave a small, broken laugh. "Even the universe was playing games with me. My cousin, who had visited our flat that time, he has very good thick, long hairs. He used to use Dove shampoo, to take care of his hairs. I didn't think much of it until I smelled it in the washroom. A familiar scent. Then it hit me—Noor's hair. She always used Dove. Every time she sat close, every time I buried my

face near her… that fragrance. And there it was again, haunting me in my own bathroom. The universe reminding me of her."

I exhaled deeply, feeling my chest tighten. "I waited… 30 days, 45 days. Nothing. No message. I couldn't control it. I broke. I should've given her six months, maybe she would've healed—but I tried to talk to her again. Hi, hello, small messages… ignored."

The road ahead was straight, but my mind swerved back to that one night. "Then came this Mangalore story. I had visited Mangalore for some reason. On my way back to Bangalore, there were only two seats left—one right behind the driver, another at the very back. By god's grace, I booked the last seat. That decision saved my life. Because that night, the bus hit a truck. The driver and the guy behind him were crushed with major injuries. If I'd taken that front seat… I wouldn't be here today, Mariyam."

I continued, my voice lower now. "I got away with minor injuries. I was shaking, panicking, watching blood, screams… I wanted to talk to someone special, someone who could calm me. Even cigarettes couldn't help. So I texted Noor. Just a 'hi.' I wrote that if I'd taken the front seat, I'd be dead. And then… I told her something I'd never admitted—I wished I had died, because at least that pain would've been easier than her hate."

"She didn't reply. She was asleep, maybe.

I reached home somehow. But in the morning, my phone started buzzing—her call. Again and again. I ignored it first. Then I picked up."

I smiled faintly, reliving it. "She was yelling—*'Where are you? Are you okay? Are you hurt? Tell me, I'll come right now if you need me!'* Mariyam… do you see the contradiction? She said she doesn't love me, she doesn't want me—but the panic in her voice, the fear of losing me, it was real. She still loved me. She just couldn't admit it."

"I explained everything calmly. She sighed with relief and said, *'thank god you're safe… I never wanted you to die, Faaz. Please don't take me wrong. If you need anything, text me. Anytime.'*"

"And that… was my hint. My proof. She still cared. Deep down, she still loved me."

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At The Edge Of Hope

I took a long breath, exhaled slowly, my eyes fixed on the road as if every headlight passing us carried a piece of my past. "I don't know why, Mariyam," I said, my voice low, "but I just… I wanted to talk to her again and again. The love of my life… with her, I was something else, someone better. Without her? I was nothing. But she wasn't talking. Not a word. It was killing me day by day. Haunting me. I tried controlling myself, I swear I did. I told myself, *don't disturb her, maybe she'll miss you if you stay silent.*"

I gave a bitter laugh and shook my head. "But then my mind—my fear—it whispered: what if the ones manipulating her twist this silence too? What if they told her, *'See, he doesn't care anymore, that's why he's not even trying to get you back.'*? What if she believed them? That thought… it tore me apart."

"One fine day, I was at my parents' house. My sister asked me to send something from her WhatsApp, so I opened it. And then… Noor's name popped up. I don't know what took over me, Mariyam, but I clicked it. I read everything. And… I swear… I broke right there."

My voice grew heavier. "Do you know what I read? My sister was convincing her—pleading with her—to sort things out. At first, Noor replied normally. But then she wrote… *'Even if Faaz was the last person on earth, I'd rather die than marry him.'*"

The words lingered in the car like poison. Mariyam gasped softly, covering her mouth with her hand.

I nodded, my throat tight. “She said she hated me. Hated my face. Those weren’t words said to me—they were words said to my sister. Do you know how that feels? To see the woman you loved once telling your sister she’d rather die than be with you? It was like someone stabbed me from behind, and twisted the knife.”

My voice cracked. “The same Noor who used to spend hours talking to my sister… now replying after three or four days, just for the sake of formality. And when my sister asked if she was free, Noor said—‘I’m at JW Marriott, having dinner with my friends.’ Next day—‘I’m at Four Seasons, having brunch.’ Not once. Again and again, for a whole week.”

Mariyam’s eyes narrowed, curious. “And… she wasn’t lying?”

I sighed. “No. My sister asked the same. You know what Noor did? She sent photos. Pictures of her, smiling like she didn’t care about the world. But Mariyam… there was something that cut me deeper. She wasn’t with her girlfriends. No. She was with two or three male friends. No girl at all. Just her… and them. New restaurants, new hotels, new outings.”

“And then she told my sister… *‘This is all I ever wanted in life.’*”

I fell silent for a moment, my jaw clenched. “Mariyam… if this was what she wanted, why didn’t she tell me before? Why didn’t she say she wanted new places, new outings, a new world? I would’ve taken her everywhere. I would’ve given her all of that. Instead… she chose to show that face to my sister. And I… I started doubting myself. Doubting my love. Asking myself if I made a mistake choosing her.”

The road blurred in front of me. “I couldn’t hold my thoughts, Mariyam. I tried for a week, keeping it inside. But I lost control. I texted her on WhatsApp: *‘Today evening, I’ll be waiting at your bus stop. Please… I want you to meet me.’* She didn’t see the message. Didn’t reply. But still… as usual… I went. To her stop. RV College metro station.”

I sighed, my hands trembling slightly on the wheel.

Mariyam leaned forward, her voice full of urgency. "Then what happened, Faaz? Did she talk to you? Did she… clarify all this?"

I looked at Mariyam, my voice shaking but calm, like a man who had already lost his war.

"That day, Mariyam… something happened I don't want even my worst enemy to ever feel. No lover deserves to go through this kind of moment. I cried… cried with so much pain that even my own soul couldn't carry it anymore."

I took another puff, letting the smoke swirl out of the window. "As usual, she got down from her office bus. I was standing there, waiting for her… hoping she'd look at me and remember us. Instead, she came straight and said, *'Why are you here again? Everything is clear, right? Then what's the use of coming? You're disturbing me! You're such a headache for me!'*"

I closed my eyes. "She yelled at me for five minutes. I didn't say a word. I let her finish. But then, her eyes fell on my hand. The flex band covering my injury from that bus accident. For a second, she forgot her anger. She held my hand gently, touched my wrist, and asked, *'Are you really okay? Does it hurt? Why are you limping—did you hurt your legs too?'*"

I looked at Mariyam, confused even now. "Tell me… what does that mean? She says she hates me, but the moment she sees my wound, she holds me like she still cares. I couldn't even reply, Mariyam. I just kept staring at her, lost."

I exhaled. "Then I asked her… about those messages she sent to my sister. About those words—those pictures. Do you know how she replied? Aggressively. *'Who are you to ask me? You're not part of my life. Please fill this in your head. Don't come to me again and again!'* She screamed."

I clenched my fist. "And then… I said it. *'This is the last time, I promise. I won't come again. But today, just once, talk to me honestly. No filters. No lies. Just truth.'* She froze. Looked at me for two minutes. And… I swear… in those two minutes, I saw it in her eyes. She wanted to end her hate. She wanted to hug me. She wanted to collapse in my arms and cry it out. But she couldn't. Someone else was controlling her strings."

I swallowed hard. "And then… something strange happened. I was struggling to button the cuff of my sleeve. She saw me. She came closer. She… buttoned it for me with her own hands. For ten seconds, I felt her love again. I could see it. The warmth. The care. Everything was there. But fear… the fear of 11th September… it was stopping her. I tried to assure her, I said, *'If I ever wanted to hit you, I would have done it the very first day. But I never did. I'll never do it again. Please believe me.'*"

I shook my head. "But she didn't listen. She walked away. Left without looking back. And I stood there… like a man who had lost his entire world."

My voice broke. "I had promised myself… whatever it takes, I'll sort things out today. No matter the time, no matter the effort. But instead, I ended up smoking five cigarettes at that bus stop, waiting like a madman. Then I texted her. *'Hey, I can understand your behaviour. I'm here near your PG, I'm not forcing you. Please think about me, think about us. I'm hardly 100 meters away from you.'*"

I gave a hollow laugh. "She saw it instantly. Replied, *'Please don't trouble me. Go home.'* But I ignored it. Because I didn't want to leave. I never wanted to leave. If leaving was in my nature, I would've left her on 11th September itself. But love… love meant forever. Forever means not leaving at any cost."

I looked away. "By 9 pm, I was hungry. I ate a bowl of Maggi at the stall near her PG. Then kept sitting there. Waiting. Expecting her message—*'Fine, I'm coming. Let's talk and finish this*

hate.' That was the hope I was feeding myself. But it never came. 10 pm passed. 11 pm passed. Midnight came. The tea stall closed at 10:30, the entire street was empty. I still sat there."

My voice fell into a whisper. "I texted her again. *'I'm still here, waiting. It's too cold, but I'll stay till you come.'* She replied, *'I'm not coming. Do whatever you want.'* And this time… she added abusive words. Noor. The same girl who never even spoke harshly in our relationship. Now calling me names. I couldn't believe it. My eyes… they couldn't even recognise her anymore."

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1 am. 2 am. 3 am. Nothing.

By 4 am… I had smoked nineteen cigarettes in a row. I was shivering in the cold, waiting for her.

And you know what, Mariyam? In that silence, I put on my AirPods. A song started playing. Sanam's voice filled my ears…"

I whispered the lyrics as if they were still echoing in my heart:

"Tum naa jaane kis jahaan mein kho gaye….
Hum bhari duniya mein tanha ho gaye….
Maut bhi aati nahi… aas bhi jaati nahin….
Dil ko yeh kya ho gaya, koi shai bhaati nahin…
Loot kar mera jahaan, chhup gaye ho tum kahaan… tum kahaan…"

I took a deep puff of my cigarette, my chest heavy.

"Ek jaan aur laakh gham, ghut ke rah jaaye na dam
Aao tumko dekh lein, doobti nazron se hum
Loot kar mera jahaan, chhup gaye ho tum kahaan…"

The words cut me open, Mariyam. I sat there till 5 am. Eyes wet. Hands frozen. My body weak. My soul shattered.

Finally, I couldn't hold it anymore. I booked an auto. And before leaving, I texted her one last time. *'Hey, I'm leaving. Thanks for letting me know my worth. Hope you have a wonderful life.'*

It showed only a single tick.

She had blocked me.

She didn't care. Not even if I had died that night from the cold, she wouldn't have bothered.

I looked down at the cigarette trembling in my fingers and whispered to myself:

"Sometimes, life gets so cruel... it doesn't kill you with death. It kills you with hope."

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I looked at Mariyam—it was almost 11 pm now. We were hardly another 20 kilometers away from home. The traffic was still heavy, horns echoing, headlights glowing everywhere. Bangalore never sleeps… not even at 11. People drove around like it was still evening.

The story I was telling had reached its end. Or at least, what I thought was the end. But Mariyam… she didn't look bored at all. Not even for a second.

I smiled faintly and asked, "Princess, did you get bored by any chance?"

She instantly shook her head, her eyes steady on me. "Not at all, Faaz. I'm actually surprised… this much pain you have in your life! And you've been carrying it all alone. I'm glad you shared it with me. I always used to wonder why Faaz smokes so many cigarettes… today I got my answer. But…" her voice softened, "it's not good for your health. You should seriously think about quitting."

I glanced at her, then back at the road, nodding slowly. "You're right, Mariyam…"

For a few seconds, silence filled the car except for the hum of traffic. Then she turned slightly towards me and asked, "Was that the end of your story? Did you never meet her after that incident? She never tried to talk to you? You never saw her again?"

Her questions cut deep. I exhaled and kept my eyes fixed ahead. "Yes… that day was the final. I never saw her after that evening." My voice cracked just a little. "But if you're asking about the efforts I made to get her back… that didn't end there. I still tried, until this one particular incident."

Her eyes lit up with curiosity. "Oh? Is it? Then tell me!"

"Yes," I said, tightening my grip on the steering wheel. "I gave my last try to sort things out. But… it didn't work."

Mariyam leaned forward slightly, her voice soft but insistent. "Tell me more about it, Faaz. I want to know—what did you do? How did you do it? And what was her reaction this time? Was it the same… or something else?"

I glanced at her for a second, a small, sad smile playing on my lips. "Okay, fine. I'll tell you…"

And with that, I continued.

After that incident… where I waited for her till 5 in the morning… after that, I stopped trying to contact her. I was blocked again. From her end, she had already blocked more than a hundred contacts of mine. And on my side, more than a hundred efforts to meet her had been rejected—directly, to my face.

When you hold a rope for too long, it starts hurting your hand. And when that pain becomes unbearable, you eventually have to let go. I think… this was the time for me to let go.

I had made thousands of good memories with her. But this *one* incident twisted everything. She only held on to this one mistake of mine… ignoring all the good we had.

I glanced at Mariyam, my voice breaking a little as I added—***"You know… people don't really appreciate the good things you do for them. They only cling to the bad. And that's what defines you in their eyes."***

For the next two months, I didn't try contacting her. I thought maybe… if I gave her time, she'd think about us. That her stone heart might melt. Because I still had faith in the love I gave her… I believed it had weight; it had meaning.

But only I know how I survived those two months. How much I suffered. How unstable my mind had become, trying to solve the puzzle of my own life. My thoughts were killing me from the inside. And yet… I never stopped asking God for forgiveness. Forgiveness for my mistake, and for giving Noor back into my life.

I never missed a single prayer. Sometimes, I even woke up at 3 in the morning to pray, just so I could remember her in my duas. I prayed for her health, her success, for her heart to soften, for her to realize what she was doing was wrong.

Then… one fine day, while scrolling through Instagram, a familiar profile popped up in my suggestions. It said *"you might know this person."*

It was her cousin. Just a 16- or 17-year-old kid. But he knew about me. He knew about us. I had even met him a couple of times. In fact, me and Noor had once taken him to watch his favorite movie. He used to tease her, saying, *"Faaz is the bestest for you didi, no matter what happens, don't leave him."*

When I saw his profile, something triggered inside me. Casually, I started talking to him. He replied like he didn't know anything about what was going on these days. So I confessed—I told him the incident, I told him Noor had broken up with me.

He listened carefully. And then he dropped a bomb I wasn't ready for.

"Faaz *bhai*… Noor *didi* is getting engaged in two months. With a guy her mom selected."

I froze. I was alone at home that time. My hands started shaking. My heart was racing. My breath felt stuck in my throat. I immediately dialed Noor's number—blocked. I tried her mom's number—blocked again.

Tears filled my eyes.

I quickly texted her cousin: *"No matter what happens, I'll go talk to Noor's mom myself. I'll convince her. Whatever it takes."*

He replied back instantly: *"Do you still love her?"*

Without a second of hesitation, I typed: *"Of course I do."*

Then he shot back words that pierced me—*"Then why the hell did you hit her? Just because of you, she's getting married now. Her mom is scared of you. And because of you, her mom is ruining her career."*

Those words hit me like a knife. The guilt… the regret… it felt unbearable.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, the same thoughts kept haunting me. I didn't even blink for a second. By morning, I made up my mind.

I called my closest friend. "I'm coming tomorrow," I told him. "I have something serious to do."

I traveled all the way to Noor's native place. But before going straight to her mom, my friend suggested— "Fahad, let's go to the people whom her mom listens to the most. Her grandparents."

And it clicked. Yes. Noor herself had told me once, when things were good between us, that her mom always listened to her dad's parents. They lived near a petrol pump, behind a colony. So

we went there, driving a two-wheeler in the summer heat. It was 50 kms journey!

I carried hope with me that day—hope that if I managed to talk to them, if they agreed, then they'd convince Noor's mom too.

Finally, we found their home. I greeted them with respect. I sat with them and told them everything… how much I loved their granddaughter. How I wanted to keep her happy for the rest of my life. I told them about my parents, my job, my earnings, everything they needed to know about me.

They listened. They nodded. They were impressed. And then they assured me—
"We will talk to her mom. We'll make her understand. Because after loving each other for more than five years, leaving each other at this stage is not acceptable."

Hearing that, I felt alive again.

The very next day, I went with my friend and Noor's grandparents to her mom's place.

My friend was more excited than me. He had seen me at my lowest. He had seen me cry, suffer, collapse, break down. He wanted this to work as much as I did. I still remember he told me, *"If everything goes well, I'll sit with bhabhi myself and tell her everything. How you cried for her. How you missed her. How even her name changed your whole mood."*

I miss that friend today… He isn't alive anymore. He lost his life in a bike accident. But that day, he was everything to me. My support. My strength. My brother.

Noor's grandparents told us to wait about 100 meters away from the apartment. "We'll go in first, talk to her mom, convince her. Then you can come."

We agreed.

Me and my friend stood outside, waiting. He offered me a cigarette to calm my nerves. I refused. "No," I said. "I'm about to meet her mom. If she smells it, she'll think I'm a regular smoker. I don't want to take that risk."

He chuckled. "Okay, fine, understood. But then why the hell are you wearing formals?"

I smiled faintly. "When me and Noor were in good terms… she told me once, *baby, whenever you come to meet my mom for a marriage proposal, please wear formals. My mom gets impressed by men in formal wear.*"

So today… I remembered that. And I wore formals.

Hearing that, my friend burst out laughing. He couldn't stop.

And even in that tense moment… his laughter gave me strength.

*****

Mariyam asked softly, "Then what happened? Did you meet Noor's mom? Did Noor even know you were standing near her apartment?"

I shook my head slowly. "No… I tried to inform her. I tried calling her from my friend's number. She didn't answer. She didn't even respond to a single message. Nothing. It was like she already knew… and wanted me to be left hanging."

I paused for a second, staring blankly out of the car window as if reliving that night. "But Mariyam, I desperately wanted to talk to her mom. I wanted to convince her at any cost. Because I knew… if I didn't, she would force Noor to marry another guy. And I couldn't… I just couldn't let that happen without at least trying."

So me and my friend waited there. Two straight hours. Standing outside, restless, anxious, my heart racing every second. I was expecting a call from her grandparents anytime.

Finally, after two hours, the call came. They asked me to meet them 2–3 kms away from Noor's apartment.

I went. My hands were trembling, my legs were heavy, but I went.

And then Noor's grandmother looked at me with eyes full of sadness… and told me everything.

She said Noor's mom wasn't listening at all. In fact, she tried to insult them for even bringing my name into the house. *"Do you even know who this guy is? And you are here to talk about him?"* she said. *"I exactly know what to do in this situation. Please don't interfere in my decisions. And whatever happens, I'm never, ever going to give my daughter's hand to that guy."*

Then the words came that broke me into pieces.

"He is worthless. Useless. He has nothing. He's behind my daughter's money. He's manipulating her. He says he works in a good company but in reality, he's jobless and fully dependent on Noor's money."

And she didn't stop there. She even dragged my parents into it. She said my father wasn't in the police department, but "something else."

I stood there… numb. Frozen. Silent. It felt like I lost everything in one blow. The war I had been fighting so long… it was gone. Over.

I had tried everything—*everything*—to make it work, but now everything had slipped from my hands.

For two to three minutes, I lost control of my own mind. Every moment I had with Noor—every laugh, every tear, every promise—flashed in front of me like a film.

And one question kept hammering inside me—"Do I really deserve this hate? Do I really deserve this kind of treatment?"

Because the truth, Mariyam, is this—Noor's mom doesn't even know my full name properly. She doesn't know what I work, where I work, nothing.

And the biggest lie? That I was dependent on Noor's money, I swear on everything, I never let Noor pay for anything. Not even a single rupee. My mom had always taught me—***if a girl is paying for something while she has a man beside her, then that man is not a man.***

And I lived by that. Not just with Noor, but with everyone. My friends, my colleagues, my family—never, not once, did I let anyone pay for me.

Only me and Noor know… how much I spent, where we spent, how I tried to give her everything I could.

And yet… here I was, being painted as someone who was after her money, after her property.

That one cut deep. Because I had never once asked even my own father about our property, about our wealth. Never. I was never that kind of person.

The only thing I wanted… the only thing I loved… was Noor herself. Not her money. Not her looks. Not her status. Just her—her innocence, her simplicity, her care, her love.

That's what made me who I was. That's what changed me.

I looked down, my hands clenched, my voice cracking as I whispered to Mariyam— "And still… all that love, all those years, all those sacrifices… got reduced to a single label—*worthless.*"

I looked at Mariyam, my voice heavy, almost breaking, and said—

"Noor's mom… she didn't stop there. She went one step ahead. She directly called my mom and dad and humiliated them. She told them everything in her own twisted way. She insulted my sister, my mom, even my dad. The worst part? They didn't even know what was happening. I never told them I was going to meet Noor's mom. I didn't want them to get hurt again—they were already shattered because of my behavior these past days."

I clenched the steering tightly, taking a deep breath. "And you know the strangest thing, Mariyam? Noor's mom acted in front of Noor like nothing had happened. Like she hadn't done anything. As if her hands were clean. That was the kind of game she played."

"In just minutes, I got a call from my mom. She was crying… yelling at me. She said, 'Come home. Meet us right now.' Without a second thought, I went."

I glanced at Mariyam for a moment, then continued. "They were angry at me, but at the same time, they were worried… too worried. They could see how mad, how broken I was becoming. We sat together—me, my mom, dad, sister—for more than three hours. Talking, arguing, crying. And finally, we decided—we'll give one last call to Noor. My mom would speak to her. My mom would ask her directly what she wanted. And whatever Noor said… that would be the end of it. No more attempts, no more waiting, nothing. If she said no, then I'd have to end everything right there."

I went silent for a moment, the weight of that memory pressing on me, before continuing.

My mom dialed her number. My heart was racing. I couldn't breathe properly. I was biting my nails, my legs were shaking like hell. They started with a normal conversation. Then my mom… she asked her tauntingly, "I heard you're getting engaged?"

Noor replied, *"No aunty, not at all."*

I felt a little relief. A tiny bit of hope lit up inside me.

Then my mom asked her—'Beta, do you know what your mother said to me? What she said about Fahad?' And Noor… she defended her mother. She said, *'I know my mother, she hasn't told anything wrong. I trust her.'*

My mom let it go and said, 'Okay, leave that matter aside. I'll ask you one simple, straight question. Do you really want to be with Fahad? Do you really love him? I know he slapped you. He didn't tell us the exact reason and I don't want to know either. Just answer me. If you say yes, I promise we'll handle everything cleanly. We'll talk to your mom, we'll make her understand, and we'll come to your house with a proper marriage proposal—me, my husband, Fahad, and his sister.'"

I felt my throat tighten, the memory hitting like a knife. "Noor hesitated for a second… and then said—'No aunty, I don't want Fahad anymore. I cannot forgive him for the mistake he made. And just because of that one reason… I don't want this relationship.'"

I looked down, my voice trembling. "After hearing that, my eyes filled with tears. My heart shattered into a thousand pieces. My mom tried to make her understand. But no… she had already decided. No matter what, she wasn't going to change her decision."

I swallowed hard, blinking away the wetness in my eyes as I whispered, "That was the last time I ever heard Noor's voice."

I went completely silent after the call ended, Mariyam. I couldn't even move for a few seconds. It was like someone pulled the ground away from beneath my feet. I kept replaying that one word in my head—*"No."* Just one word, but it crushed years of love, trust, and dreams in an instant.

I felt my chest tightening, like I couldn't breathe. My eyes blurred with tears but I didn't even want to wipe them. It was like

my body had turned numb. You know, Mariyam, when you give your whole soul to someone, when every single day for years you only dream of that person, live for that person, and suddenly… in one second… she cuts the thread and says she doesn't want you anymore—it's not just rejection. It feels like death. A living death.

I remember staring at my mom, dad, and sister, but I wasn't even present there. My ears were ringing, my heart was pounding so fast I thought it would burst out. I couldn't understand anything—why did she say no? How could she not even give me one chance to explain, to fight, to prove? I felt worthless, like maybe her mom was right… maybe I am useless. Maybe I really don't deserve her.

I couldn't stop asking myself—*"Was my love not enough? Did all those years mean nothing? Did she really forget me so easily?"* Every smile, every laugh, every little memory of her… it kept flashing in front of me, stabbing me over and over. And the worst part? She was still alive, still breathing somewhere just a few kilometers away from me, but for me… she was gone forever.

That night, I wasn't able to sleep properly. I just lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, with tears rolling down silently. My mind was screaming, but my body was frozen. I felt like I had lost not just Noor, but a part of myself. The best part of me.

And you know what hurt the most? Not her "no." What hurt was the way she said it… so calmly, so firmly, without even a trace of hesitation. As if all our memories didn't even exist. As if I was just some stranger she once knew.

I swear, in that moment, it felt like my whole world had ended.

*****

The Weight Of Years

It was 11:43 pm when I finally pulled into our apartment parking. My voice was tired, but my heart was still restless after sharing everything. I turned to look at Mariyam, half-expecting her wide curious eyes to still be on me… but she was fast asleep.

I don't even know when she drifted off. Maybe it was when I got lost in those heavy memories and kept speaking without blinking. Maybe it was when my voice broke while telling her about the final "no" from Noor. But now, looking at her innocent face resting against the seat, her little breaths falling rhythmically… it felt surreal. This girl, hardly ten years old, had just become the **second person in my life** to know my full story. The first was Noor herself.

I smiled faintly, even with the storm inside me. Carefully, I parked the car, walked around, and opened her door. Without disturbing her, I slid my arms under her and lifted her. She felt so light, so delicate. Her hair fell across her forehead, her lips slightly parted in sleep—she looked angelic. For a moment, my heart softened. I leaned down and kissed her forehead gently, as if sealing my trust in her silence.

Carrying her, I walked to the lift. The night was quiet, only the dull hum of Bangalore still awake outside. When I reached our floor, I rang the bell softly.

The door opened, and there she was—Sam. Her eyes widened instantly, a mix of joy and relief washing over her face. She hadn't seen Mariyam for more than twelve hours, and the moment she

saw her daughter in my arms, her lips curved into the warmest smile.

"Finally," she whispered, her voice filled with love. She kissed Mariyam's cheek, patted her gently, and I could see her heart calm down just by holding her. That sight alone was worth the whole tiring day.

I carried Mariyam to her bedroom, laid her carefully on the bed, and tucked her in. She stirred for a second, then clutched her pillow and slipped back into deeper sleep. I stood there for a few moments, watching her—the innocence, the peace. A sharp contrast to the chaos burning inside me.

After that, exhaustion began to swallow me. My body was begging for rest. For the whole day I had been driving, speaking, reliving painful memories… my eyes were heavy, forcing themselves shut.

Still, before heading to my room, I sat with Sam in the living room for a short while. I told her how the journey went, how the roads were, how Mariyam was curious throughout. She listened carefully, nodding, her eyes still glancing now and then at her daughter's room with relief.

Once I was done, I excused myself. I walked into my room, switched off the lights, and collapsed onto the bed. Within minutes, I drifted into sleep, carrying both the heaviness of my past and the strange comfort that tonight… someone else knew my truth.

The next morning, my eyes opened around *5:30 am*. The weight of the night still lingered somewhere inside, but I didn't let it pin me down. I freshened up, dressed in my jogging wear, and headed to the parking. My *Thar* was waiting there silently, and within minutes I was on the road, driving through the still-sleeping city.

Usually, I jog three times a week, but I had always avoided ***Cubbon Park***—because it held memories too precious,

too raw. But today, something inside me pushed me there. Maybe it was the urge to test my heart. Maybe it was the need to face the ghost of a past I still carried.

The drive took about thirty minutes. As I entered the gates, the world felt different. The air was crisp and cool, carrying the gentle smell of wet earth. The towering trees stretched their arms across the sky, their green leaves forming a soft canopy that filtered the newborn sunlight into golden beams. A mild breeze brushed against my face, almost whispering secrets of the dawn. The birds were already awake, chirping and fluttering across branches, filling the silence with their orchestra. The rays of the rising sun spilled between the trees, painting everything in shades of gold and orange. For a moment, I just stood there, inhaling the peace that only mornings can give.

I parked my car, slipped on my cap, secured my phone in the arm band, and began jogging. Step by step, I felt the rhythm of my body syncing with the rhythm of the earth.

Then, unknowingly, my feet carried me toward a *particular spot***.** The moment my eyes fell on it, time folded back five years. My chest tightened. This was *our* place. I could see it clearly in my head—the two of us sitting there for hours, as if the world outside didn't exist. I remembered laying my head in Noor's lap, pretending to read one of ***Chetan Bhagat's novels***, though half the time my eyes were on her. She used to run her fingers slowly through my hair, sometimes twisting a strand playfully, sometimes just caressing me as if I were the safest thing she held.

Standing there now, in the exact same spot, it felt as though no time had passed at all. I could almost feel her touch, hear her soft laugh, see her eyes shining down at me. My breath slowed, and for a moment, Cubbon Park wasn't Cubbon Park anymore—it was a living memory.

As I jogged a little further, my eyes caught sight of the ***old shed*** tucked away between the trees. My pace slowed almost instinctively. I knew this place—it wasn't just a shed for me. It was a part of my heart carved into these walls.

That day… how could I forget? We were caught in the sudden, *unexpected rain*. One second, the sky was clear, and the next, heavy droplets came crashing down on us. We both laughed, running toward this very shed, already soaked to the skin. Her dupatta clung to her shoulders, and my shirt was dripping, but none of that mattered.

Inside the shed, the world seemed to shrink down to just the two of us. The rain hammered on the roof above, the sound blending with the occasional rumble of thunder. She stood close to me, shivering slightly—not from the cold, but from that mix of excitement and nervousness.

I remember how her fingers reached for mine, holding them tightly, as if my hand was the safest anchor in the storm. I looked down at her, into her eyes, and for the first time in my life, I felt what true intensity was. That silence between us… it was louder than the thunder outside.

And then it happened. Without planning, without words—just raw emotion pulling us in—our lips met. Gentle at first, almost hesitant, but it deepened with every second until the world outside disappeared. The sound of raindrops became the soundtrack, the cool wind brushing past us while we were lost in warmth. It wasn't just a kiss—it was a confession, a promise, a memory that burned itself into my soul.

Standing in front of the shed now, years later, I felt a rush of goosebumps crawl over my skin. I could almost hear her laugh echoing in my ears, feel the weight of her hand gripping mine. For a moment, it was like I was there again—wet clothes, wild rain, her eyes locked with mine.

But then reality came crashing back. The shed was empty. The rain was long gone. Only I remained—alone with a memory that would never come alive again.

As I reached the other side of the park, another memory struck me like lightning. The rain had stopped that day, and the air smelled of wet earth mixed with the faint aroma of fried food. I could almost see us again—standing in front of that little ***vada pav stall***, steam rising from the pan as the vendor flipped the patties.

I remembered how I was teasing the vendor, cracking silly jokes, and Noor was laughing uncontrollably, her smile brighter than the morning sun. Along with the vada pavs, he served those long, *fried green chillies*—spicy enough to make your eyes water. We took turns having them, one bite each, and soon both our eyes were red, tears rolling down from the spiciness. Yet we were laughing like kids, asking the vendor for water while even he couldn't control his laughter at our madness.

It was such a ***pure, raw moment of happiness***—two people in love, sharing a street snack, the world reduced to vada pavs, laughter, and burning tongues.

But as I stood there today, catching my breath from jogging, my eyes lifted to the distance—and I froze. From this side of Cubbon Park, I could clearly see the tall, glass façade *of* ***JW Marriott*** glinting in the morning light.

In a second, the warmth in my chest turned cold. My heart began to race as her words came back to me like a cruel echo:
"I'm at JW Marriott having dinner, didi, with my friends."
Those pictures she sent to my sister flashed in my mind—Noor, sitting with those male friends, smiling, enjoying, looking like she had everything she ever wanted. And that sarcastic line…
"This is what I always wanted in my life."

It stabbed me again, just like the first time I had read it. The same feeling of betrayal, of being replaced. The same ache of knowing that the girl who once held my hand in the rain was now laughing with someone else in a world I was no longer part of.

My heartbeat grew heavier, faster. My throat tightened. Without thinking, I turned away from the park, my jog cut short. I walked quickly, almost running, until I reached my car. My hands trembled as I unlocked it, sat inside, and closed the door.

I grabbed my sipper, took a long gulp of water, trying to wash down the knot in my chest. I adjusted the rear-view mirror, staring at my own face—the reflection of a man caught between ***the sweetest memories and the harshest truths***.

I connected my phone to the car's music system, let Russ's voice spill through the speakers, and slowly pulled the car out of the parking lot. With every beat, the city lights blurred past me, and I drove back toward the apartment—carrying memories heavier than the morning silence.

*****

When I reached home, everyone was still asleep—mom, dad, Sam, even Mariyam. Without making much noise, I went straight to my room, got fresh, changed into something comfortable, and then headed quietly to the kitchen.

I put the kettle on and started preparing chai for myself. The smell of boiling tea leaves filled the kitchen, and in that silence, even the sound of water bubbling felt louder than usual. Once the chai was ready, I poured it into my cup and slowly walked back to my room.

As I entered, my eyes fell on the bed. There it was—an unopened pack of cigarettes lying on the blanket, almost as if it

had been waiting for me. I placed my cup of chai on the side table, picked up the pack, lit one, and stepped out into the balcony.

I sat down, cigarette in one hand, chai in the other. The city was waking up slowly—the sky still painted with early morning colors, a few birds chirping in the distance, the air cool and calm. I took a deep drag, let the smoke out, and sipped my chai. For a moment, it felt like the two most dangerous comforts of my life were sitting with me—the cigarette burning between my fingers and the memories of Noor burning inside me.

After that *no* from Noor, I had made a promise to myself—I won't contact her again. She said no, and no means no. But somewhere deep inside, I always believed one day she would come back… one day she would sort the things between us. Because love like ours wasn't meant to end like that. The way I loved her—far beyond words—and the way she once loved me back, it couldn't just vanish. I kept telling myself, "Every story must have a happy ending… every darkness must one day see the light."

So, I waited.

One month passed. Then two. And before I knew it, six months had gone by. No response. No call. No message. Nothing.

Here I was, drowning in my thoughts, every single day hoping *today might be the day*. Maybe she'll text, maybe she'll call, maybe by some miracle she'll walk back into my life. That hope—it kept me alive and killed me at the same time.

Cigarettes became my only companion. From smoking 18–20 a day, I somehow cut it down to 8–10. The smoke reduced, but the love I had for her never did. In fact, it grew stronger every day. Looking at her picture before sleeping had become a ritual for me. And at night, she would come in my dreams—sometimes smiling, sometimes crying, sometimes just looking at me silently. Those dreams felt more real than reality itself.

I told myself—"Now it's her turn. She said I was troubling her, disturbing her, putting too much effort. Fine. I won't anymore. But the day she comes back, I'll never let her go again. No explanations, no conditions—straightaway marriage, whatever it takes."

Days turned into months, and months into years.

In the meantime, I stepped into the business world. Started managing 2–3 businesses, and to my surprise, I was doing well. Earning good. I worked on myself—improved my physique, expanded my knowledge, explored new passions. I learned guitar, picked up MMA, even horse riding. On the outside, it looked like I was building myself, moving forward.

But inside? No matter what I did, where I went, who I met… my mind always circled back to her. *Noor. My love. My weakness. My strength.*

I would blush randomly, imagining us together in different situations—me playing guitar and her sitting in front of me smiling, or us riding horses side by side, or her cheering for me in an MMA fight. Little fantasies, small imaginations—that was the fuel of my days.

And then, exactly after **two years**…

Silence. Still no message. No call. No sign of her.

*****

When New People Entered

The cigarette was burning between my fingers, the fire almost touching the bud. I crushed it in the ashtray and without even thinking, lit another one. With one hand holding the cigarette, the other hand wrapped around the warm cup of chai, I took a slow sip and once again… fell back into my thoughts.

After exactly two years of silence, when I had almost lost myself in waiting, I met a person online. Her name was **Mehek**.

It started with a simple *hi, hello*. Then days passed, messages turned longer, and slowly we became close… close friends. One day, we finally decided to meet in person.

Mehek too carried a past. She had an ex, but unlike me, she had completely moved on, forgotten that chapter of her life. Mine was different. I wasn't meant to give up. I wasn't ready to forget. I never wanted to forget.

That day, we sat and shared our stories—both laughing at how life had played with us. I spent the entire day with her, and after Noor, she was the second person who became truly close in my life.

But I was crystal clear from the very first day—I told Mehek straight: *"Whatever happens, we will remain friends only. No love, no relationship, just pure friendship. We'll share our good times and bad times, but that one place in my life, it's already taken. It belongs to Noor, and it will always belong to her."* She nodded, she understood, and she respected it.

And I'll admit—Mehek was a kind soul. The kind of girl who could instantly change my mood. Whenever she was around, the heaviness inside me lightened. She was like a stress-buster. A good listener, too—someone who heard me without judging, without cutting me off.

She was from a place called Hassan, and every weekend she would travel all the way to Bangalore just to meet me. And those weekends became our little rituals—we would hang out, go for lunch, go shopping, explore new cafés and restaurants. But it didn't stop there—we added fun activities too. Go-karting, scuba diving, bungee jumping, off-road biking, ATV rides, horse riding—name it, and somehow we tried it. And every time, I laughed, enjoyed, and lived those moments with her—but only as a friend. That was the line I never crossed.

Days kept passing, and she became one of my closest friends.

In the middle of all this, even my first ex got married. I attended her wedding, happily, without any grudges. In fact, I was genuinely overjoyed that she finally found the right partner, the one who was perfect for her. That day, I smiled with my whole heart—it felt like a closure, a chapter sealed in peace.

And just like that… three years had passed without Noor.
And one full year had passed with this new friend, Mehek.

Then one evening, during one of our FaceTime calls, everything changed. She suddenly shifted the conversation towards relationships. She looked at me seriously and said, *"I like you."*

I smiled and replied, *"Yeah, I like you too."*

But then she shook her head. *"No… not like that. You like me as a friend. Mine is different. I like you as more than a friend."*

Her words hit me like a storm. I froze for a moment. Because I had told her—clearly, directly, from day one—that this was not

possible. That friendship was the only bond between us. That love… love was already occupied in my life.

I told her again, *"Mehek, I said this on the very first day—we'll stay friends forever. But I can never be in a relationship with you. At any cost."*

But she didn't want to hear that. She tried convincing me, she tried changing my mind, she poured her heart out. Yet I had already made my decision years ago. No one could take that place. Not now. Not ever.

Because for me—it was Noor. It *is* Noor. And it *will* always be Noor.

That's when Mehek said something that shook me: *"If I continue as your friend, it will hurt me more. I won't be able to handle it. Better I walk away from your life."*

I tried my best. I really did. I told her not to go, told her our bond was special, told her we didn't need to ruin it. But she didn't listen.

And just like that… she walked away.

After the day Mehek ended our friendship, she completely disappeared. No calls, no texts, not even a single "how are you?" from her. 6 months passed… then 8. Silence.

By then, my life had taken a different rhythm. I was busy adding new businesses to my professional growth, one after another. My earnings had now touched eight digits. Thanks to god, everything was going clean and smooth—prayer, fitness, business, even the small circle of friendships I still carried with me.

But there was one thing I never forgot, one thing I never skipped in my prayers—**Noor**. Every prayer I asked god for her. And it always felt like god was smiling at me saying: *"I'll grant you everything else, but that one prayer of yours… that one wish… it's difficult for me to give."*

Then one random afternoon, my WhatsApp notification pinged. It was Mehek. After all those months, her message popped up like a ghost from the past. I opened it.

It wasn't a "hi." It wasn't "how are you."
It was her *wedding invitation.*

For a second, I froze. Then came a mix of emotions—shocked, happy, and a strange emptiness. She had finally moved on, started her new chapter. I quickly replied, "Congratulations, Mehek." She asked me to attend, saying, *"Don't miss it."* I said yes. But deep down, I knew I wouldn't go. Not because I wasn't happy for her—I was. But because I carried a guilt. Guilt of hurting someone unintentionally, guilt of being the reason behind unspoken tears. I never wanted to play with anyone's feelings, never wanted to be that guy. But she… she had loved me differently. And I couldn't return it.

And now, here I am. After exactly **five years.**

Sitting with a cigarette in one hand and a cup of chai in the other. Living a life people would call perfect—successful businesses, money, respect, fitness, everything. Yet one piece of my heart still waits… still hopes… still prays.

I was lost in those thoughts when my phone rang—a business call. I answered, spoke for a few minutes, and when I cut it, I casually looked at the screen. The date flashed—***27th August.***

And just then—out of nowhere—someone startled me from behind with a weird noise. I almost spilled the chai!

I turned, and there she was.
Mariyam……
Laughing, her little mischief was successful. "You scared me, princess!" I said, putting my cup aside and flicking the cigarette. She giggled.

"Good morning, little angel. Did you sleep properly?" I asked.

"Yes… peacefully!" she replied, rubbing her eyes, still half in sleep.

I pulled her closer, adjusted her messy hair, and with both hands tried to tie a ponytail. She looked up at me with a mischievous smile and said, "I'm *damn* hungry!"

I laughed. "Oh really? Where's Sam? Still sleeping?"

Mariyam nodded with a big grin.

"Ok fine, princess. Let's not disturb her, it's Sunday after all. You go brush your teeth and take a bath. Meanwhile, I'll prepare something for you."

She smirked, playing along. "Alright then… I would like to order one Spanish omelette, two roasted breads, and orange juice. If I need anything extra, I'll let you know!"

I shook my head, laughing at her little drama. "Yes, madam! Order accepted."

And with that, I left for the kitchen, rolling up my sleeves, ready to cook her breakfast.

I prepared breakfast not just for Mariyam but for everyone in the house. By the time I brought everything to the table, the whole family had woken up. We sat together, laughed over small jokes, shared stories, pulled each other's legs—it was one of those rare family breakfasts where time feels slow and warm. For a while, I forgot about everything else.

After breakfast, everyone slowly drifted into their own routines—dad reading the newspaper, mom cleaning up, Sam busy with Mariyam's chatter. I excused myself and went back to my room.

I stood for a moment near the balcony door, looking outside. The Sunday sun was bright, yet soft, casting golden lines across the buildings. I could hear the faint laughter of kids playing downstairs,

the rhythmic sound of someone washing their bike, the distant honk of a car. Life around me was moving so casually, so normally… but inside, my mind was far from normal.

I leaned against the railing with my half-finished cup of chai in hand, letting the last sip go cold. My thoughts began circling again—no matter how much family warmth surrounded me, Noor's shadow somehow found a way back. Her face, her voice, that last "no"… it was like the world wanted me to keep moving, but my heart had nailed itself to one memory.

With a heavy sigh, I finally decided to take a shower, thinking maybe hot water would clear my head.

After nearly an hour under the shower, the steam had wrapped around me like a blanket. The hot water striking my skin felt good, but it couldn't wash away the storm inside my head. Every droplet carried a memory back to me, and no matter how long I stood there, her face wouldn't fade.

Finally, I turned off the tap, stepped out, and wiped myself dry. My body felt light, but my mind was still heavy. I walked back into my room, the faint smell of soap following me, pulled the curtains just halfway, letting only a little sunlight slip through.

I collapsed onto my bed, not even caring about the wet strands of hair soaking into the pillow. For the first time in days, sleep came to me effortlessly. The world outside was buzzing—it was Sunday, families enjoying, streets alive—but in my room, silence took over.

And in that silence, I drifted off. My last thought before my eyes shut was the same as always: *her...*

*****

As I slipped into deep sleep, the kind of sleep where your body shuts down but your mind refuses to rest, I found myself in the middle of a nightmare.

I was at a wedding hall—decorated with lights, flowers, music—but nothing about it felt happy. My eyes locked on her. Noor. Dressed as a bride. Red lehenga, heavy jewelry, but her face… her face was pale, drained of joy. She wasn't smiling. Her eyes weren't shining. She wasn't the Noor I knew.

I looked at the groom beside her—an NRI, a guy from the US, her mom always dreamt of. He had everything her mom wanted on paper—status, money, "settled abroad." But when I looked at him, he was nothing. His presence was hollow, his looks average, his aura dull. He wasn't her choice, and it was written all over her face.

I was standing at a distance, among the crowd, invisible to everyone except her. And then, it happened. Her eyes found me.

That one glance hit me harder than anything in real life ever did. She didn't say a word, but her eyes screamed louder than her voice ever could: *"Faaz, take me away. I don't want this. I only wanted you."*

I wanted to move, to run, to tear apart the walls of that hall and take her hand in mine. But my legs wouldn't move. My chest was heavy. The situation chained me down. I could only watch, helpless, as the rituals went on. My heart was burning, my soul screaming, but I couldn't stop it.

And then—suddenly—I jolted awake. My heart racing, sweat dripping from my forehead. I reached out for my phone with trembling hands. The screen lit up. *6:30 pm.*

For a moment, I sat frozen, trying to separate dream from reality. But the pain, the helplessness… it felt real. Too real.

I lit a cigarette to ease my mind. Taking a long puff, feeling the smoke travel through me, I closed my eyes and exhaled slowly. For a moment, it felt like the cigarette was the only thing grounding me. But then came a sharp sting in my head—a slight

headache. I pressed one hand against my forehead, the other still holding the cigarette between my fingers.

Why now? I thought. *Why are these memories coming back all of a sudden, like it all happened yesterday?*

It hit me—I shouldn't have told Mariyam my story. The moment I narrated everything about Noor, it was as if the doors to my past swung wide open again. And now, these nightmares… this storm inside me. It was like Noor was trying to reach out, like she wanted to say something through the silence of my dreams.

"Should I dial her number? Should I check if she's okay?" The question circled endlessly in my head. My heart wanted to, but then another voice inside me whispered, ***No… not every time you have to be the one to go. You did your part. You gave everything. Now, wait. If she wants, she will come.***

I finished the cigarette, crushing it into the ashtray, and dragged myself out of the room. Everyone was sitting in the hall, glued to some series on TV, laughter and chatter filling the space. I joined in, trying to bury my thoughts beneath their smiles. Around 10, we had dinner together, the usual jokes, the usual gossip, and then we all went back to our rooms.

Days began to pass in their rhythm. Morning routines, prayers, Mariyam's school drop, family breakfasts, and then my world of business—meetings, client visits, discussions with partners and investors. My schedule was tight, clean, disciplined. On the surface, everything looked perfect. But somewhere inside, a quiet ache never left.

*****

The Lake Front Reunion

Then one afternoon, out of nowhere, the plan was made— *movie day.* Everyone got excited. It had been a long since we went out as a family. Orion Mall was the destination. I booked tickets online, double-checking the seats, and by evening, we were ready. The energy in the house was light, playful.

We all left together, laughing, chatting on the way, stepping into the mall's bright lights. For once, I told myself— *just enjoy the moment.*

We completed the movie, and it was genuinely good— something lighthearted, something that made everyone smile. Afterwards, we drifted into the food court, the smell of spices and fried food hitting us from every corner. Mariyam's eyes lit up the moment she spotted KFC. Her love for it was legendary in the family. She ordered her usual mountain of food—enough to feed three people—while we all exchanged knowing glances. She would never finish it all, but this was her ritual.

We laughed, we ate, we shared fries off each other's plates, and for a while, I felt the kind of warmth only family can give. After enjoying, we decided to head home.

Me, Mariyam, Sam, Mom, and Dad stepped onto the escalator, descending from the third floor to the ground. Mariyam, as always, held my hand tightly, her little fingers curling around mine like I was her safe place.

Just ahead of us, a couple stood, whispering in serious tones. At first, I wasn't paying attention, but then their words drifted back to me—sharp, clear, impossible to ignore.

"Thank God that lady came between us and sorted our fight," the boy said, his voice low but intense. "If not for her, you'd have never forgiven me for my mistake."

The girl responded softly, "Yeah… she spoke with such maturity. The way she explained not to give up on a relationship, not to throw it away over one mistake… it really struck me. She told me to give you another chance, and somehow, I believed her."

The boy chuckled in disbelief. "Who even does that for strangers? It's like she knew what we were going through."

The girl paused, her voice trembling slightly as if she herself was amazed. "I asked her name before she left…"

The silence between them stretched a moment too long, and then she said it—

"Noor."

My heart stopped. My grip on Mariyam's hand almost loosened. The world spun for a second.

Noor.

My Noor.

My eyes widened, my heartbeat surged into a wild rhythm, my legs felt weak on the moving escalator. That name—after years of silence, of waiting, of unanswered prayers—echoed around me louder than anything else.

I didn't know what to do. Questions smashed into me like waves. *Was it really her? Was it possible? Had fate finally brought her back this close?*

By the time we reached the ground floor, my mind was made up. I bent down to Mariyam and whispered, "Just a sec, princess, I'll be back."

I turned and walked straight to the couple. My voice was rushed, a little unsteady, but I managed to say, "Sorry, I couldn't help but overhear your conversation… that lady you mentioned… the one who helped you. Did you really say her name was… Noor?"

They looked at each other, then at me, a little surprised by my urgency. The boy nodded. "Yes. That's what she said."

I swallowed hard. "Do you know where she went? Where can I find her?"

The girl smiled faintly, almost as if remembering her. "She was at the lakeside café. Just an hour ago. Sitting alone with a cup of coffee. She said she had to leave soon."

For a second, my knees buckled. I muttered a quick "Thank you" and turned back to my family.

"Guys," I said, trying to mask the storm inside me, "something urgent came up. Can you go home without me? I'll join later."

Sam raised her brows. "You okay? You look worried."

"No, no—it's just a sudden meeting with a business partner," I lied, forcing a smile.

But Mariyam was sharp. She looked me straight in the eyes, her eyebrows rising twice, that little gesture she always used to ask silently, *What's going on?*

I couldn't help but laugh softly. I kissed her cheek and whispered, "There's something I need to check. I'll tell you everything when I get back."

She smiled, though her eyes still held curiosity.

I handed the car keys to Sam, said a quick goodbye, and walked away. Each step was faster, more desperate. My heart was thundering in my chest, my throat dry, palms sweating.

The lakeside. That's where she was.

I ran.

Ran like fate itself was waiting there for me, one hour too late.

The words kept echoing in my head—
Her name is Noor… sitting by the lakeside… holding a coffee.

Every step I took towards the exit of the mall felt heavier. My legs were moving, but my mind was running faster than them—flashbacks, memories, moments with her, that smile of hers, the way she used to call my name. Was it really her? Or just another Noor?

I scanned every corner. My eyes were restless. One part of me wanted to find her, the other part was terrified of what I'd see. What if she was with someone? What if she was gone already? What if this was just a cruel trick of fate?

My eyes were searching restlessly, scanning every corner of the lakeside. My heart was beating so fast it felt like it would burst through my chest. *She's here… I can feel it. She's near.*

And then—there she was.

I froze.

From a distance, I saw her… my Noor.

She was sitting on a bench, facing the lake, her fingers curled around a steaming cup of coffee. She looked lost in thought, her gaze fixed on the water as if it held all the answers she was searching for.

In that moment, my world stopped.

My eyes instantly filled with tears. Every memory, every moment we had shared, every smile, every fight, every kiss—everything came crashing back at once, so vivid, so alive. It felt like the last 5 years collapsed into nothing. She was right there, just like before.

I stood still, unsure—*Should I go? Should I call her name? Or should I just watch her from here, Afraid that reality might shatter this dream?*

And then it happened.

She slowly turned her head, almost like destiny itself had whispered to her that I was near. Her eyes met mine.

My breath caught. I stood frozen.

Her expression shifted in an instant—from a quiet sadness to sudden disbelief, and then into a joy so pure it cut right through me. She set her coffee cup aside without even thinking, her hands trembling, her lips parting in shock.

And then she ran.

She ran straight towards me, her dupatta flying behind her, her footsteps echoing in the silence of the lakeside. I couldn't move at first—I just stood there, tears rolling down—but as she came closer, my feet finally began to walk, slowly, then faster.

And before I knew it, she crashed into me, wrapping her arms tightly around me.

We hugged!!!

We hugged like we were never going to let go again.

Her fragrance, her hair brushing against my cheek, the way her chest heaved as she cried into me—it was the same as before. The same warmth. The same love.

Tears poured down both our faces. We didn't speak a word. We didn't need to. Our hearts knew—we had finally crossed all the storms, all the years, all the distances.

Finally… after mountains of silence, after oceans of waiting, after years of unanswered prayers…

We met.

We found each other again.

And in that moment, nothing else in the world mattered.

*****

After that hug, we didn't let go immediately. Our eyes locked, unblinking, for two… three minutes. And then—out of nowhere—we both laughed. That awkward, helpless laugh that comes when you realize how *dumb* it was to break something so precious. No words, just silence speaking louder than any language.

Then she broke it— "Say something…"

I still couldn't. My throat had dried up. I was just… stuck between disbelief and happiness.

She touched my arm softly. "Come… let's sit. There are so many things I need to tell you."

I nodded, and we walked back to the bench.

As we sat, my eyes caught the half-finished coffee on the side. "You never used to drink coffee… why now?" I asked, trying to lighten the weight sitting on my chest.

She gave a faint smile. "Yeah… to relieve stress. It's a habit now. Like you can't stop smoking, right?" She tilted her head knowingly. "By the way… you still smoke?"

I smirked faintly. "Not like before."

We both fell into silence again. Sitting face to face, breathing the same air after years—it felt surreal. I was blushing like a teenager. She was too.

For a second, I drifted off in my head—*How would Mariyam react if I told her this? The way Noor ran towards me, the way we hugged like a full-on filmy scene… she would tease me for a lifetime.*

"Faaz…" Noor's voice pulled me back.
"What are you thinking?"
"Nothing…" I smiled, shaking my head.

She leaned forward. "Tell me… what are you doing these days?"

I answered with a quiet pride. "The dream I once told you… I'm living it now. Businesses, investments—I've built everything I said I would."

Her eyes softened, shining with pride. "I knew you would. I always knew you were different."

She kept asking questions—about my work, my life—but I stopped her. My heart had held this weight for too long.

Noor lowered her gaze for a moment, then looked back at me and said softly, *"Faaz… I actually saw you two weeks ago, in Goa. You were sitting by the shore, the waves almost touching your feet. A cigarette in one hand… and your daughter by your side."*

Her words jolted me. I leaned forward, eyes wide. *"Wait—what? You saw me that day? Why didn't I notice that? And listen carefully… she isn't my daughter."*

I paused, my voice firm but gentle. *"That little girl was Mariyam—Sam's daughter. You remember Sam, right? My sister… the one you used to spend hours talking with when we were together. She always adored you."*

Jiju is on the business trip, so they are with us it's been more than 6 months now!!!

Noor's lips parted in surprise, her eyes flickering with guilt and realization. *"Oh… I see,"* she whispered. *"All this time, I thought she*

was your daughter. I thought you'd moved on, started a family, found happiness without me. And if I had come closer, if I had spoken to you, maybe I would have ruined whatever life you'd built. So I stayed quiet. I just watched you from afar… and walked away."

Her confession felt like another knife twisting in my chest. We were so close that day—on the same beach, under the same sky—yet separated by silence, by assumptions, by fate's cruel timing.

"Wait. Before all that… tell me one thing, Noor. If this… *us*… was meant to happen, then why didn't you ever try to contact me? It's been more than five years. Why so long? Do you even know what I went through? How I survived?"

My voice broke. "Wherever I went, I saw you. Whatever I did, I remembered you. Nights… I'd sleep staring at our old pictures, just to find some peace. I waited, Noor. I waited every single day, because I believed one thing—you said I was torturing you, disturbing your mental peace. So I stopped. I thought… if you truly love me, you'll come back on your own. But you took five years."

She reached out, placing her hand over mine, her eyes glistening. "Faaz… calm down. Let me explain."

She inhaled deeply. "I admit it—the words I told you back then, about you torturing me, disturbing my peace… they were wrong. So wrong. But Faaz… I wasn't myself. I was completely brainwashed."

I looked at her, confused.

"My office colleagues, my roommate, even my mother… every single day, they poisoned my mind. They'd call, they'd check, they'd push me. *'Don't go back to him. He doesn't deserve a second chance. What if he hits you after marriage? You can't escape then. At least now you can break up. You're mature. Think of your future.'* They made me believe I was making the right choice. They convinced me your anger, your temper, your so-called ego… would destroy me."

Her eyes filled with regret. “I couldn’t see right from wrong. I trusted them more than I trusted my own heart. I let them manipulate me, and in that, I lost you. I lost *us*.”

She turned her face away, tears rolling silently.

“What—my anger and ego?” I laughed, but it was the kind of laugh that trembled. “You know me better than anyone, Fajr. You know exactly who I am.”

I leaned forward, searching her face as if the truth could be found in the tiny movements around her eyes. “I’ve told you a thousand times—I changed the day you came into my life. Your one look could melt the worst anger inside me. Remember the time in engineering when that lecturer shouted at me? I was ready to explode. You just looked at me from the back of the class, just that stare. I sat down, calmed myself, and everything went away.

She blinked. I took a breath and kept going, my voice steady now, the list of small things unlocking like pages I’d kept folded for years.

“Ego would have said no when you needed me. Ego wouldn’t have smoothed your hair at midnight when you couldn’t sleep. Ego wouldn’t have pressed your legs to relief the pain that you were having by standing the whole day in the office. Do you remember these things happened on the train? Ego wouldn’t have sat next to you on that bus with my hand in your lap, tapping your fingers to keep you calm. Ego wouldn’t have bought you the necessary things in your hard days when you told me you were in pain and then waited outside the pharmacy until the shop opened.

I let the images fall between us—scenes she already knew but maybe hadn’t seen all together. “I stopped smoking because you hated it. I dropped people from my life because you felt uncomfortable. I took a metro, changed three buses, scrambled through rain and traffic to see your smile. I wrote you those handwritten letters—do you remember the photo of our shoes, the

Vans and the Bata? I defended you when gossip spread at college. I worked nights so I could afford the small things that made you happy. I begged you to let me be better, not because I wanted to win anything, but because I wanted to be the man who could stand beside you without causing you fear."

My hands were in my lap. My voice softened to something almost ashamed. "If I had an ego, I wouldn't have asked your forgiveness ten thousand times. If I had an ego, I wouldn't have been the one to apologize first, again and again. The ego fights to stay right. Love—real love—chooses to be better."

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The lake lapped quietly beyond the bench. Her fingers found mine, light and tentative, as if testing whether the warmth was still there.

"I'm really, really sorry for my behaviour, Faaz. I hurt you a lot… I know that. But please, listen to me today. That day—11th September—the photos and videos you saw… let me clear everything."

I froze. Even after all these years, that date felt like a knife, still sharp, still cutting.

She took a deep breath, her hands fidgeting nervously in her lap. "I never wore shorts in my entire life—you know that. I hated them. And you remember too—the only thing you ever asked me not to do was wear shorts in public, because as a boy, you knew how people look, how the world talks. That one boundary you gave me, and I crossed it. Why?" She bit her lip hard, tears welling. "Because I was angry. Angry at you. And to hurt you, to make you jealous, I wore them. Childish. Immature. Just to prove a point. I never even wanted to click pictures, but my colleagues kept saying I looked good, that it would be a memory… so I let them." And I was wrong to put mehandi on my thighs, just to make you jealous, I did all these.

My chest tightened, every word stabbing deeper. She looked down, her voice lowering.

“And the video…” she whispered. “Please, trust me—nothing happened. I was still recovering from the words you threw at me. That day, our office group decided to hang out at my friend’s place—me, Raahul, Somanna, and Pallavi. But last minute, Pallavi had some family emergency and cancelled. So I ended up at Raahul’s apartment, waiting for Somanna to arrive. It was afternoon, I was cooking chicken for us. You know how clumsy I am… the curry spilled on my white t-shirt. It looked bad, and I panicked. So I borrowed Raahul’s shirt, just to cover up.” She gave a weak, almost embarrassed smile through her tears. “After cooking, I lay down on the sofa for a while. When Raahul came in, I decided to record his reaction, just for fun. That’s the video you saw, Faaz. Just a stupid, meaningless clip. Nothing more. Nothing bad happened.”

Her voice broke, trembling now, tears streaming freely. “I should have told you this back then. I should have explained. But instead, I went quiet.

I said words I should never have said. Words that pushed you away forever. And then you slapped me…….

I replied! Only I know how much I suffered after hitting.

“Trust me, Faaz. I never betrayed you. I never did anything that would break you… or us. I was angry. I was foolish. But I was never unfaithful.”

My throat burned. The cigarette I had smoked earlier still lingered on my tongue, but suddenly, all I could taste was the bitterness of regret. I looked at her—really looked at her—and for the first time in years, I saw not the girl from those haunting photos and videos, but the Noor I had loved with every breath.

Her tears glistened in the dim light by the lake, her face a mixture of guilt and desperation. And in that moment, I didn’t

know what hurt more—the fact that she had made those mistakes, or the fact that I had carried the weight of them for so long without ever knowing the truth.

I let her finish, then folded the memories back into my voice like I was closing an old, painful book.

"Do you remember this? Just two weeks before that mistake from my end… As usual, I came to surprise you. You said you were hungry, so we went to that small café beside CCD in Global Village Tech Park. We ordered Maggie, sat down, and started eating.

Then a random girl walked in—she was wearing shorts. You know it, right? How lustfully the shopkeeper's eyes followed her. The way he was staring, the cheap expressions on his face… and then, slowly, his eyes shifted towards us.

When I got up to pay the bill, he wasn't even looking at me. His eyes were glued to you. And you—covered so decently, dressed in the best way possible—yet he was still looking at you with those filthy, lustful eyes.

Do you remember what happened after that? How I lost it. How I fought with him, warned him right there, made it clear he can't dare repeat it. And you—you were the one who held me back, the one who calmed my anger, the one who pulled me away from that place."

Noor's voice trembled as she spoke, her eyes fixed on mine.
"How stupid I was… how dumb I was to listen to them. I still regret my decision every single day. I should have given you a second chance, Faaz. Now I know—everyone deserves a second chance. If I had given you that chance, my life today would have been perfect. I know for sure… no one can ever love me or care for me the way you used to."

Her words stabbed through me like knives. I could feel the weight of her regret, the cracks in her voice that carried years of

pain. For a moment, all the bitterness, all the distance, all the anger between us seemed to fade away.

*****

The Second Chance We Lost...

I reached out, my own voice soft but steady.
"Let it be, Noor… whatever happened, has happened. Let's not ruin this moment by drowning in the past. I'm sorry—truly sorry—for the mistakes I made. But I promise you, whatever happens from now on, I will *never* repeat them. No matter how tough life gets, I will never let you feel that pain again. I've learned my biggest lesson."

I took a deep breath, my heart racing, my palms sweating.
"And let's not waste any more time. I'll talk to your mom, I'll convince her. I have everything she ever wanted in the guy for you. Just say yes. Just trust me this once."

My voice cracked as I asked, **"Will you marry me, Fajr?"**

The words hung in the air, trembling, heavy, alive. For a second, she didn't react. And then—she broke.

Tears gushed down her face, her shoulders shaking uncontrollably. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed like a child. My heart sank in confusion. Panic shot through me. *Did I say something wrong? Did I push her too much?*

"Noor… what happened? Why are you crying like this?" I whispered, sliding a glass of water towards her. I placed my hand gently on her back, patting her, trying to calm her down. But she didn't stop. Her tears only grew heavier, as if every drop carried years of secrets.

Finally, she lifted her head. Her eyes, swollen and wet, pierced through me. Between her sobs, she whispered, "You… you really

don't know about me? You don't know what happened… six months back?"

My stomach dropped. My expression froze. Something about her tone felt tragic, unbearable, like the ground beneath me was about to give way. I wasn't ready for this. I wasn't prepared for any kind of answer that could follow.

She placed her trembling hand over mine. I felt her cold fingers pressing against my skin. Inside, I prayed desperately—*Please, God, not this. Please don't do this to me.*

Her lips quivered as she finally let it out.
"Faaz… **I'm married. It's been six months now."**

The world around me shattered.

Her words struck me harder than a thousand blows. ***Married.*** The word echoed inside my head, louder and louder, until it felt like my chest was tearing apart. My breath grew heavy, my throat tightened, and my eyes burned but refused to blink. For a moment, the world around me blurred—the café, the people, even her face—all I could see was darkness closing in. My heart, which had been racing with hope just seconds ago, now felt like it was being crushed under an unbearable weight. I wanted to scream, to ask *why*, to shake her and demand how she could let this happen—but no words came out. My lips parted, but silence spilled instead. Inside me, a storm raged—anger, pain, betrayal, and yet… an endless love for her that refused to die even after this cruel truth.

Married? God, why now? After all these years of waiting, of praying, of holding on to her face in my memories—you bring her back only to take her away again? I clenched my fists under the table, my heart screaming but my lips sealed. I wanted to fight destiny itself, but all I could do was sit there, shattered, staring at the only woman I ever truly loved.

I sat there frozen, her words slicing through me one after another. My throat felt tight, my lips refused to move. I wanted to speak, to scream, to ask God why He was playing such a cruel joke on me, but all I could do was sit in silence, staring at her tear-streaked face.

Her voice trembled as she continued, *"After two years of leaving you, I realized how badly I had ruined everything. I wanted to come back, Faaz. I wanted to show you how wrong I was, how much I still loved you. I searched for you on Instagram—I saw your stories, saw you smiling, traveling, building the life you once dreamed of. I thought you'd moved on. I thought you'd never forgive me after all I had done. And so, I stayed silent… not because I didn't want you, but because I was afraid of hurting you again. Afraid you'd say you'd found someone better."*

Each word felt like fire burning through my chest. She had been watching me all these years, silently, while I was dying for her every single day.

She took a shaky breath and whispered, *"Then my mom… she forced me. She said you were happy without me, that you didn't care anymore. She fixed my marriage to a man from California, a software engineer. At first, he was sweet. I thought maybe a new start would help me forget. But after two months, he showed me who he truly was. Drinks, rage, beatings… sometimes with his hands, sometimes with whatever he could grab. I endured it all, Faaz. Two weeks back, we returned to India. We even went to Goa, just so he could put on a show for my mother, pretending everything was perfect. But the truth is—he's a monster. And I… I regret every second I didn't come back to you."*

Her words echoed in my head like thunder. For five long years, I had waited, prayed, and hoped for her. For five long years, I held on to her memory, refusing to let anyone else in. And now, here she was… sitting in front of me, married to the wrong man, trapped in a nightmare she never chose.

I felt lost. Confused. Betrayed not by her, but by fate itself. Was this the love story I had fought for? Was this the ending God had written for me?

I sat there, numb, her words still circling in my mind like a curse I couldn't escape. Every second that passed felt like salt rubbing deeper into wounds I thought time had healed. My patience… my years of silent prayers… my unshaken trust—it all felt like a cruel joke now. The wait wasn't worth it.

I wanted to ask her, "*Why don't you leave him? Why are you still enduring all this?*" But the question died inside me, suffocated by a fear I couldn't name. Maybe she was hiding something. Maybe she was pregnant, and that's why she couldn't walk away. The thought burned in me like acid. The idea of another man—any man—touching her was unbearable. My heart screamed to ask, but my pride buried the words before they could escape.

In that moment, I wasn't angry at her anymore. I was angry at myself—for believing, for waiting, for holding onto hope when the world was already telling me to let go.

I pushed my chair back, stood up slowly, and looked at her one last time. I didn't speak a word, but my eyes said everything—*you ruined it, Fajr. You ruined us.*

Without waiting for her reply, I turned and walked away. Each step felt heavier than the last, my legs trembling like they'd forgotten how to carry me. The air around me was thick, suffocating. Her voice, her tears, her confessions—all of it echoed in my head, louder and louder, until it felt like my skull would split.

I had dreamed of this reunion for years. I had imagined every version of it—the hugs, the forgiveness, the promises of forever. But never this. Never walking away empty-handed, with nothing but ashes where my heart used to be.

As I left the place after talking with Noor, I stepped out of the mall with a storm raging inside me. My chest was tight, my legs heavy, my mind a battlefield of questions that had no answers.

And then—as if the universe itself wanted to mirror my pain, the sky tore open. Rain came crashing down, furious and wild. Lightning split the darkness, thunder roared like a wounded beast.

I didn't run.

I didn't care.

Each drop stung against my skin, but I welcomed it. I was already drowning in something far heavier than water.

She… she was the only one who had ever seen tears in my eyes.

I had never cried before anyone—not once. But for her, I had broken down.

Then why didn't she come back to me? Why didn't she fight for us?

If my slap was my mistake, then why didn't she slap me back?

Why didn't she stand before me, demanding answers, demanding love, demanding me? She had the right. She was my everything. Instead… she chose silence. Instead… she chose to listen to voices that never knew us. Instead… she chose to walk away from the only man who loved her beyond life itself.

The rain hammered down harder.

My shirt clung to me, my hair dripped into my eyes, my shoes splashed into water-filled streets—but I kept walking, aimless, broken.

At one point, I stopped in the middle of the road.

A car's headlights cut through the storm, blinding me.

I didn't move. I didn't care.

For a split second, I almost wished it would hit me, end everything. But the car swerved, the horn blared, and I was left standing there—a ghost in the rain.

I tilted my head back, staring into the black sky, lightning flashing above me.

And then, with everything I had left inside me, I screamed her name.

"NOOR!!!"

The sound tore out of me, raw, desperate, broken.

It echoed into the empty night, but the only answer I received was thunder. And as I stood there—drenched, trembling, shattered—one thought consumed me, tearing me apart over and over:

Why did you leave me, Noor, when you were the only one who could have saved us?

"Never let others write your love story.

And if life ever gives you a chance—give love a second chance."

*****

The End!!!

To All the Readers!!!

This is my debut book.

A piece of my heart that took almost three years to shape.

Behind these pages are countless nights of writing and rewriting, moments of doubt, pauses, changes, and the quiet persistence of not giving up. This book is very close to me—not just because it is my first, but because it carries emotions that stayed with me long after the words were written.

I hope this story reaches that one special person who unknowingly became my strength, who motivated me, and who gave me some of the most beautiful days of my life. Without that inspiration, this book would have never existed.

To every reader who picked up this book—thank you. Thank you for your time, your trust, and your heart. I truly hope these pages made you feel something, even if it was just for a moment.

I would love to hear your thoughts, feedback, and suggestions.

Your words matter to me more than you know.

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With gratitude and love,

Sohail K K

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